Bart Flos

THE PERFECT PROJECT

Why People Are Key To Success

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Why People Are Key to Success

Previously published by Bart Flos:

Het anti-klaagboek
Het anti-sleurboek
Het perfecte project
De kenniskermis
Vooruitkijken voor gevorderden
De mens als grens ('Our Inner Limits')

The Anti-Complain Book
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Addendum XI – BONUS – The Tough Choice: Collapse Resilience

If something can go wrong, it will go wrong.

Murphy's law

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ABOUT THIS BOOK

Imagine you're a project manager asked to take over an ongoing project. It involves a complex, global implementation of a new ICT-system, which must be integrated across the entire business supply chain. But the team doesn't make its targets. They lack insight, oversight and overview. There is lots of turmoil and stress and every day the company is losing heaps of money.

Like a new kid on the block, you get started and in no time you manage to get the entire team together. After two days of workshops with intense *backward and forward scheduling* exercises, the current project status is compared to the original planning. It soon becomes clear that the project will not be finished by the commissioned date. There are too many hitches, too many loose ends and just not enough time.

After reaching agreement with your team about the new status, you draft a report with a more realistic planning and deadline. You send the report to John, the program director and chief operations officer of the company. He shouts over the phone: 'Unacceptable! This can't be right! I've already promised everybody that everything will be finished on time…' He calls you over to discuss the report and before you know it, you're face to face with him in his office.

John sits there nervously twitching back and forth in his chair, tweaking his laptop, checking his smartphone and shuffling papers around on his desk, obviously in distress about all the planning shenanigans. Finally, he works up enough courage, looks you straight in the eye and says: 'I would like to ask you

something...'. He folds his hands before his mouth as if he is going to start a prayer, pauses for a while and then says: 'Can't we just get it done withóut planning?'

Why are we monkeying around all the time?

Welcome to the wonderful world of project management! This is a funny anecdote and I do like to share it, especially to newcomers. But this joke comes between a laugh and a tear, because I've experienced this kind of behavior far too often. And I'm not the only one. Honestly, how does someone come up with stuff like that? You've probably witnessed on more than one occasion how crazy things get when a project starts to go haywire.

According to meta-studies, two-thirds of all projects, in general, are doomed for failure. And half of those never make it to the finish line. The other half does, but only by the skin of its teeth and at a huge expense, wasted energy and tremendous human suffering. It's a remarkable phenomenon with an especially intriguing constant. Only one-third of the original goals people set in projects are successfully completed within the boundaries that were set up-front in terms of time, money and quality. There is no specific branch, industry or business type in which this persistent phenomenon *doesn't* occur. No matter how big or small, thick or thin, long or short, expensive or cheap, local, national or international: one third of all projects end up in the dumpster.

For as far back as I can remember, I've always been intrigued by how people, from utter genius to crazy maniac, work together. From the greatest successes to the worst failures, as interim project manager and crisis manager, I always had a front row seat. Nowhere else people are challenged more than when put

under pressure in a project, which often entails a combination of potentially catastrophic events that lead to major screw-ups.

I observed the misery. I witnessed people fail dramatically, vertically across the chain of command and horizontally along the supply chain, and watched entire projects come apart at the seams. All the time I thought to myself: 'Why are we monkeying around all the time? What do we have to do to stop it?' Fortunately, I had plenty of opportunities to find answers to my questions.

The First Law of Golub

A carelessly thought-out project takes three times longer than expected; a carefully thought-out project only takes twice as long.

In the mid-1990s I changed jobs from logistics to ICT. It was way before the Internet Bubble burst and 'the sky was the limit'. There were plenty of projects to go around. Most ICT companies had enormous project management departments, which gave me plenty of opportunities to gain experience and make a career for myself. I got at it with passion and before long I was promoted from team leader to project manager, and subsequently to international program manager. I established a good track record with lots of successful projects in the pocket and they often called me in as troubleshooter. Ultimately, that made me the perfect mediator and crisis manager.

I was amazed and astonished at how often I saw projects nosedive. I couldn't stand the thought that it seemed unavoidable. What was the common denominator in these failing projects, one that could help and stop it from

happening again? I managed a variety of projects, from implementations, migrations, transitions, workplace projects to business process optimizations, you name it, and slowly but surely my understanding of the fundamental problem grew.

James Bond doesn't exist

It became clear to me that many of the reasons why projects fail are perceived as *causes* when they are in fact *symptoms* of a larger problem. A project doesn't fail because of *bad* planning, a project fails because John doesn't care about planning at all!

No wonder that new methodologies and technologies have little or no effect on the success rate of projects. Project managers are constantly bogged down with intensive training on how to execute new methods and techniques to make projects run smoothly. But they fail anyway. Entire departments are sent off to Project Management School, but it doesn't help one iota. Digitalization and automation also don't help, even though our computers are thousands of times faster than they were only a few decades ago. The truth of the matter is that projects continue to fail at the same rate they've always done. Studying the few success stories that remain, I have found out that botched up projects are caused primarily by one fundamental factor and one factor only. And this primary cause of project failure has nothing to do with the applied methodology or technology, or with being computer savvy.

Of course, I also studied the numerous project management methodologies that teach us that the end of a project follows the beginning, that we must prepare a project as best as we can and that we must break it up into orderly

steps, serial phases and parallel processes. Duh! After that, doing the project management dance appears so easy, so logical and so predictable. But appearances are deceptive.

I understood the jargon of project managers with ease. I could sit out an entire management meeting floated with *business cases, acceptance criteria, initiative phases, quality plans, phase and configuration management, phase transitions, change management, risk status, management tools, work packages, exception reports, product delivery, routing and standardization*, without cracking a smile or breaking out in laughter. But it started to bother me more and more, because, apparently, it-just-didn't-work. I soon started to change my mode of operation completely.

Gilb's Law of Unreliability

Miscalculating is a human trade, but to really fuck things up you need a computer.

Jumping from one project meeting to another – and from one project crisis to another – I slowly but surely discovered a collaboration pattern that might best be explained by comparing it to a fire triangle. A fire triangle describes the relationship between oxygen, combustion temperature (heat) and fuel. Together these three elements keep the fire going, but when you remove one or more of them, the fire goes out. In any collaboration, but especially where projects are concerned, you can apply a similar fire triangle:

Man - Method – Machine

I call this the Primary Fire Triangle wherein *Method* stands for the processes, procedures and protocols that we use, *Machine* represents the technology and tools that are required to execute a project: from fire stone to arrow point and from steam engine to computer. *Man*, as in *mankind* or *People*, doesn't take a central position in this triangle but it is positioned on top. People cannot be successful without machines and methods. But people and technology are useless without a methodology. And people with methods are useless without technology. You get the gist. Remove one of the three elements from this fire triangle and any collaboration will 'extinguish'. It will come to a halt and subsequently fail miserably.

The problem with all these project management methodologies is that they don't say much about the required *leadership in projects*. It is simply assumed that everyone possesses the ability to do what the methodology stipulates. The inventors of *Prince2*, *PMBoK*, *IPMA*, *Agile*, *Lean* and *Scrum* assume that project teams have James Bond, Superman and Lionel Messi as members and that they are led by Steve Jobs. They don't seem to realize that these kinds of team members are fictitious, dead or simply unavailable. They only exist in the world of make-believe, in *La-La-Land*.

Eventually, I came to the realization that the real reason why projects fail have little or nothing to do with poor methods or faulty machines; it is all about the deployment and involvement of human beings of flesh and blood. People are driven to extremes in projects. Under the right amount of pressure, they will excel and outdo themselves beyond belief, but the opposite is also true. Failing, derailing projects that go haywire can bring out the worst in people; they

uncover dark and ugly behavioral properties. We all respond differently under pressure.

Suddenly the program director comes stomping into the project room, yelling and blaming everyone for everything in an absurd state of rage, foaming at the mouth, stamping his feet, slamming the door and disappearing again before you can wink your eyes.

The chairman of the steering group informs the project manager in advance that he has to take into consideration that none of the members of the steering group will ever take the time to study the project documentation beforehand.

At the last minute, the steering committee announces it wants to completely overhaul the mutually agreed approach of a huge, complex and expensive project that has been meticulously planned, by a simple show of hands standing the meeting: 'Who's in favor? Put your hands in the air... Yesss! Proposal accepted.'

Weiler's Law

Nothing is impossible for someone who doesn't have to do it himself.

Unmask your botched up project

The more they consulted me as mediator and crisis manager, the less I emphasized on the substantive details of methodology or technology and the more I started to focus on the people at hand and their ever-mesmerizing

character traits. When I encountered sheer chaos, I kept asking myself the same question: what is the *real* problem here? And time and time again, it turned out that it was a waste of time to blame the *method* (our processes, procedures and protocols) or the *machine* (our technology, computers and tools). Every single time the pivotal answer, the decisive determinant of botched up projects boiled down to the human factor. *It's the people, stupid!* It's high time we get the people out of the toolbox.

So, you can understand that this book will not cover the advantages of one method over another. Or which software you must run on your computer to turn every project into a success. Or which technical traits and skills a good project manager needs to possess or what makes a steering committee better in commandeering a project. This book is primarily about the human factor: which buttons need to be pressed and which knobs need to be turned to stop folks from messing around, to quit the jumbling and muddling, to prevent each change endeavor from drowning in the swamp of failure and to finally make them all Perfect Projects.

And believe it or not: it *is* possible. By constantly putting people first, I have been successful as a leader, as a project manager, program manager and crisis manager. I have taken many projects across the finish line successfully – or at least made sure it did not end in total disaster – oftentimes against all odds and no matter how disastrous the initial status quo. For sure, it requires a great deal of natural leadership, maturity and resilience, but you, my friend, can learn to debunk your botched up project too. Whether you are a team member, team leader, project leader, staff member, steering group member or stakeholder, the Perfect Project is within grasp for everyone.

Armed with PRIC-lists, botch-up tests and checklists for problem and success analysis, this book will help you combat the chaos around you. Not only will you debunk and unmask your own botched up project, but you will also learn how, when, and where to intervene (or let others jump in). By turning the knobs of leadership, maturity and resilience you will get the people out of that damn toolbox and make them enjoy the smell of success again.

Do you ever go shopping?

After John had asked me if we couldn't 'do it without planning', I was taken aback for just a brief moment. Did he really say that? Wow. Bizarre. But by the look in his eyes, I could tell: John wasn't joking, he was dead serious. Repeating rational arguments or throwing project management wisdom at him wasn't going to help here, so I thought of another way to get my point across.

I suddenly asked him: 'John, do you ever go shopping with your wife?' Utterly confused, he threw himself back in his chair heatedly and shouted: 'Yeah, of course I go shopping with my wife! What, for Peat's sake, has that got to do with anything?' 'Well,' I responded kindly, 'Let's find out, shall we?'

I continued: 'Which three things do you at least have to agree upon before you're able to be successful in going shopping?' He clearly didn't get it and his eyes were gleaming with frustration, so I decided to help him a little bit more. 'First of all, you have to decide whén you are going shopping. Because if you have this week Saturday planned and your wife is set on next week, it's not going to work, right? After that, you must decide whére you're going shopping. Because if you go to Amsterdam and your wife to The Hague, it's

not going to be a grand success, now, will it? Finally, you've got to agree on the time you're going shopping. Because if you are ready at two in the afternoon and your wife at nine in the morning it's not going to be a nice day together, now, is it?'

John snapped back angrily: 'Yeah, yeah, but what – for crying out loud! – does this have to do with my project?' 'Well, John', I said, and I leaned towards him, folded my hands, looking him straight in the eye: 'If something as simple as taking your wife out shopping for a day already requires you to plan these three simple things, then how do you expect to run your huge, complex, international project withóut planning? If you can't go shopping without reaching explicit agreement about planning, then what are we supposed to do?'

INTRODUCTION

Looking beyond the length of your project nose

The five main causes of project failure are easily explained within the context of human behavior and not by the (im)possibilities of methods or machines. People are always key to success.

Listening to Mr. Murphy

At the end of World War II, an American captain named John Paul Stapp conducted several scientific experiments at an Air Force Base in California. His research was known as *Project MX981*. Stapp investigated the odds for pilots to survive an airplane crash. In other words: how much brute force can a human body take? He and his team laid down a railway track of a couple of hundred meters with a steel sledge attached to it, powered by rocket engines. At the end of the runway, this sledge reached speeds up to 300 kilometers an hour, after which the hydraulic brakes slammed on and ended its devilish ride.

After conducting several test drives using dummies, John Paul Stapp got in the sledge himself. He was convinced that a human body could endure much more than the, assumed fatal, 18 g's of acceleration (18 times the normal force of

gravity on earth). The experiment wasn't exactly comfortable to him – to make that the understatement of the century – but he survived up to 35 g's!

To measure the acceleration forces better, Stapp called in the assistance of an air force engineer with a reputation that already preceded him. His name was *Edward Aloysius Murphy*. He brought a couple of new sensors with him that were tested on location, by shooting a live chimpanzee across the track. But when they wanted to check the results, nothing had been recorded: the sensors were incorrectly installed! Murphy, rightfully frustrated, grumbled, 'If mechanical engineers have a chance to do something wrong, they *will* do it wrong'. That caught on. Murphy had barely left the Air Force Base (he only stayed there a couple of days) or his 'law' had already become a common manner of speaking throughout the base.

Green's Law of Debate

Anything is possible if you don't know what you're talking about.

If it weren't mentioned at a press conference a few weeks later, *Murphy's Law* would have died a quiet death. However, during that meeting, held at location of the Air Force Base, a journalist asked Stapp why nobody was injured during these dangerous rocket sledge experiments. Stapp simply replied: 'Whatever we do, we always apply Murphy's Law'. Luckily, the journalist pressed on and Stapp was forced to explain that the preparation for each experiment was done with an elaborate and meticulous analysis of every aspect that possibly *could* go wrong, to prevent potential disaster. A couple of journalists from national

magazines and newspapers subsequently wrote about it, explaining *Murphy's Law*, and the rest, as we say, is history.

Throughout my career, I've always had a sympathy for Mr. Murphy. I imagined him as someone being present 'in spirit' during a project. In silence, he beholds our plans, ideas and intentions, holding a glass of brandy in one hand and a big fat cigar in the other. He usually smiles in approval, but if we neglect our duties, if we forgo a proper preparation and botch it all up, he will come for us big time. With a sip of brandy and a puff of his cigar, he simply nods his head and, with thunder and lightning, makes everything go wrong that can possibly go wrong. And so, early on in my career I already learned that you'd better listen to Mr. Murphy very carefully. I made him an *Honorary Team Member* in each of my projects and debated him, battled with him, hated and loved him, whilst dealing with all the project problems we inevitably were going to encounter.

Project botch-ups for professionals

There are almost as many definitions for the word 'project' as there are books written about 'project management'. Your definition is as good as mine; it all boils down to the same thing. However, for the context of this book, I will use the following simplified definition:

A project encompasses all change-related activities within a regular business process that are executed with a clear set goal, specific added business value and a razor-sharp defined beginning and ending.

To put it bluntly, many projects are not worthy of that definition, because they don't even come close. As explained, more than two-thirds of all projects fail miserably. Half of them don't even make it to the finish line. The other half does make it across, but only with a lot of blood, sweat and tears and at an enormous financial and personal expense. The derivative is simple: only one-third of all projects turns out to be a success, with reference to the original goals set in terms of time, money and quality.

Roy's Second Law

If you can distinguish between a good and a bad advice,
you don't need advice.

Businesses take a huge economic, financial and social loss with failed projects. In 2004, the Royal Academy of Engineering together with the British Computer Society, published an overview of the problems involving complex ICT projects. The report made an estimate of the cost involved. In the US, a whopping $150 billion a year is wasted on failed ICT projects and in the European Union an equally shocking $140 billion goes down the drain. Together that amounts to $290 billion annually, which breaks down to about $33 million an hour, day and night, twenty-four-seven.

In the spring of 2013, the Dutch government started for the umpteenth time a national investigation into the continuous failure of its ICT projects. Already back in 2007, several university professors published an open letter in the national newspaper *Trouw*, estimating that failed projects cost the taxpayer 4 to 5 billion euros per year. The researchers also figured out the social and

financial implications for all these setbacks. By formulating a new step-by-step plan 'the government must establish better ICT policies and execution', according to the (overly optimistic) assignment letter.

In October 2011 *De Volkskrant*, a major Dutch national newspaper, published an analysis of problems with the automation process of the policy administration at the UWV (the Dutch Unemployment Agency). In March 2004, the original costs were estimated at € 40 million. By 2007, that amount had increased to € 256 million, and in that same period it skyrocketed to somewhere between € 350 and € 400 million. That is roughly € 50 million 'leakage' per year. In August 2009, *Gartner Inc.* established that the UWV spends almost half a billion euros yearly on ICT costs. That amounts to about € 40 million a month, just shy of € 1,5 million per day, every day of the year, year in, year out. Why doesn't anybody raise a finger? Or a hand? Or cry in outrage? Why isn't anybody dóing something about it?

In a 2011 interview in *De Volkskrant*, René Veldwijk, a public administrator and ICT entrepreneur, wrote that he is 'sick of all the ICT nonsense'. Veldwijk: 'All major governmental ICT projects will fail or turn into financial nightmares. And that tendency is only growing stronger'. He argues that ICT personnel as employed with the government are a bunch of nitwits: 'ICT is difficult. A large ICT-system is a hyper-complex machine. You need to follow a straight line; if you sidetrack, it will all come tumbling down before you know it'.

The Dutch government isn't really occupied with these universal project laws. If projects exceed their time frame, they just fork over more money, Veldwijk argues. 'Because the government rather loses money than lose face. This creates a situation in which failure is in everyone's best interests and projects

never end. Because ICT is not physically tangible, and therefore in fact invisible, these abuses and excesses can grow endlessly'. In other words: if everyone benefits from failure, success becomes a threat.

Veldwijk is radical in his judgement, but he has earned the right to speak. His company was hired to resolve this ICT conundrum at the UWV. And they succeeded, big time! 'More than 150 consultants from Capgemini and a whole bunch of UWV-coordinators couldn't do it. Within five months and with only eight people, we came through and build the ICT administration policy system from scratch. For one million euros in man hours. For a project that had already spent 270 million euros and that by now must have cost, by my estimate, about 400 million euros. Because of course, the old junk is still there. What we received in return was animosity and contempt, both from the ICT department and the administrators. An agonizing reward for the greatest success in your career'.

Third consequence of Murphy's Law

If certain things can go wrong, the one that causes the most damage will.

This example implies two things simultaneously. On the one hand, it is actually feasible to tackle a project professionally and turn it into a success. On the other hand, this sobering fact, however noble, is not necessarily in everybody's interest. It is saddening to me, and it sometimes downright angers me, that ICT service providers and opportunistic freelancers can sponge off an indecisive and apparently powerless government that, on top of everything, presides over almost inexhaustible sources of money.

‘An ICT-project is a psychological minefield’, says Arno Nuijten, a PhD student at the Erasmus University of Rotterdam in an article in the Dutch newspaper *Eindhovens Dagblad* in august 2012. In particular, his research entitled *'Deaf effect for risk warnings. A casual examination applied to information system projects'* studied the psychological factors involved in these kinds of projects. '*The Casino Behavior*: you are losing, you want to stop but you can’t. Because you're anticipating that stroke of good luck, that will turn everything around. *The Expense Argument*: you've already sunk so much money into the project, so now you múst continue. And *The Completion Effect*: we've completed 90 percent; we just have to continue a little bit longer. The only hitch is it will never surpass that 90 percent’.

The conclusions from Nuijten's dissertation are underpinned with, inter alia, interviews with high-ranking managers from twelve large companies. He also subdued persons to tests. And what was the result? People are more likely to ignore negative formulated advice than advice with positive content. So much for all the complaining within projects.

These kinds of problems do not only occur in ICT projects. Projects in general are constantly failing everywhere, from the construction of a motorway underpass to the realization of the Dutch high-speed railway (estimated at around € 2 billion and completed for over € 7 billion), from the expansion of a subway rail system to nationwide infrastructure projects, from the purchase of high-speed trains (the Dutch *Fyra Fiasco* with hundreds of millions of euros lost) to building (and later crashing) a space shuttle. As soon as we want to accomplish something with a specific start and finish date, with a limited amount of time and money and with lots of people involved, things *will* go

wrong. And they always go wrong the same way. Apparently, there's something else going on here, something more generic.

Don't be deceived by the scale of projects! Those 'enormous' governmental programs that cost hundreds of millions or even billions of euros will just as easily triple their budgets when the shit hits the fan, as the 'tiny' projects within your company that 'only' cost tens or hundreds of thousands of euros. It doesn't make any difference; they all go haywire just the same It's high time to examine these intertwining time- and money consuming human disaster areas from a different angle.

25-year-old Saïd has just started his career at a big international company and he is participating in an internal introduction program. He is scheduled for a meeting with Ryan, a high-level senior department manager who just returned from a company pow-wow weekend. Ryan and the rest of the management team have been discussing topics like 'business improvement, 'core strategy' and 'shareholder's value' and the like. Now Ryan's all hyped up about it.

Big shot Ryan has prepared a summary document, that includes seven main points of the new departmental strategy. He quotes each point briefly to Saïd. Each sentence is inundated with wooly management speak, covered in buzz words like 'efficiency', 'effectiveness', 'synergy', 'transparency', 'profit maximization' and 'cost optimization'. It's all wonderful, swell, neat and dandy. Ryan glances at his young apprentice gleefully. 'Well, what do you think?'

At first Saïd is hesitant. After all, Ryan is 'the boss of his boss'. Caution is advised. But eventually he answers very carefully: 'Well, that all sounds great, when you put it together like that. But if I may ask, where do we, the people, fit in that list? What about us?' Ryan looks at him for a while, clearly shaken up, stares at his shiny slides again and stammers, 'Well, uh, that's sort of mentioned a bit here in items three and five, I think, and eh ... um ...'

Saïd's remark probably resulted in an early CLM (*), but kudo's for trying. Because in Ryan's *Wondrous and Miraculous Seven Strategic Points* not óne word was mentioned about the people required to achieve all that. Ryan was so busy yacking away in management jargon, that he had totally forgotten to include his most important asset: human beings.

(*) *Career Limiting Move*

The Seven-Tiered Hourglass: From Fail Trail to Cycle of Success

If you want to discover why projects *really* fail and how to establish a Perfect Project, you need to look beyond the length of your project nose. To be more precise: you must get off your project butt, stand-up, climb up the process and procedure ladder and extend your view. Please allow me to explain.

A simplified, two-dimensional way to observe an hourglass is to regard it as two triangles, vertically pointing at each other by the tip. Above and below, they start broad, narrowing as they approach the middle, where they meet in a crossover point. In this case, the bottom triangle represents the signature of botched up projects while the top triangle resembles the signature of perfect

projects And, as I'm sure you have already figured out, this is not an ordinary hourglass. This hourglass is made of 'project stuff' and that's why the grains of sand must flow from bottom to top, *against* gravity, representing the *Cycle of Success*, instead of flowing down, *assisted* by gravity, representing the *Fail Trail*. When we 'manage' our projects, we too must pull ourselves up against the forces of gravity, that only want to pull us down.

In the following overview I will describe the seven steps we have to climb to get from sheer chaos and turmoil to the highest level of order: *The Perfect Project*. We will work our way up from floor -3 of the parking garage, where it stinks of deteriorated concrete and urine, to floor +3, on the roof, outside in the sun, where we can breathe freely again.

Level -3: Fighting symptoms in botched up projects

Say, you want to research the background of failing projects, and you start by googling 'project failure causes' or 'what are the main causes for project failure?' The result is a seemingly endless summation of causes that you can scroll through forever. It looks somewhat like this:

– Objectives not defined, assumptions insufficiently logged, started too soon.
– Unrealistic goals and plans, no margins incorporated, project members not involved in the planning phase.
– Week foundation for the project, insufficient research into the user needs.
– Planning poorly monitored, lack of internal and external communication within the project.
– Original requirements and starting points change during the project.

– Lack of control on progress, lack of forward scheduling, no delegating, inefficiently executed procedures.
– Faulty and clumsy project management, no clear leadership, no support from the client.
– Lack of support from (top) management, failure to procure commitment, politically motivated chaotic environment instead of reality-based controlled environment.
– Unfamiliarity with scope and complexity, blind trust in new technology.
– Demotivation and resistance of project staff, working outside procedures and protocols, lack of dedication and passion.

Etcetera, etcetera. The list goes on.

No doubt, in your own experience, you've recognize these causes and most likely you can list a bunch more. Now, please bear with me whilst I conduct a thought experiment. Suppose you have been able to collect 'all' causes of project failure, assembled and structured them, weeded out the duplicates and put them in a logical order. Subsequently, you then mirror them positively and turn them into, say 'critical success factors', like so:

– 'Objectives not defined' becomes 'Ensure that the objectives are clearly defined'.
– 'Poor monitoring of planning' becomes 'Make sure the planning is properly monitored'.
– 'Lack of support from management' becomes 'Ensure management provides adequate support'.

And so forth.

For every critical success factor, you then include explanatory texts about the 'how', 'what' and 'why', you give them a number and add a tick box. Now it has become one large checklist, which you can subsequently call *Checklist for Precision Project Management* or *Tick Boxes for Project Tigers*. And off you go: from now on, everything will run smoothly and faultlessly, right? I'm sorry, I must disappoint you: someone beat you to it. There are already countless Checklists for Successful Project Management and *still* two-thirds of all projects fail, always and everywhere. So, there's got to be something fishy going on here. We must dig a little deeper, because, surely, it must be something else.

And yes, that's right! The lengthy list of 'causes' are not causes at all; they are 'causes' in disguise. And if something is nót a cause, what is it? Yep: it's a symptom, a consequence of something else. These 'causes' are mere symptoms of a much larger problem. At the lowest level in the hourglass, botched up projects are sustained and maintained by constant symptoms fighting. If we want to make progress, we must step away from the chaos and move up to the next step.

Level -2: Causes and the Fail Trail

Why does the majority of project failure analysis hardly ever surpass the monotonous repetition of the same symptoms? When faced with this kind of a conundrum, the why-question might come in handy. For each of the 'causes' you simply ask '*Why* are the objectives not clearly defined? *Why* is the planning insufficiently monitored? *Why* is there lack of support from management?' And so on.

Now imagine consistently asking the why-question for each symptom and lump sum the results. I mean, try to picture yourself doing that consistently with áll possible symptoms of project failure that you can possibly find. Well, I've done that very exercise myself and I discovered that this pool of symptoms, viewed across the entire project supply chain, from preparation to execution to closure, clump together in just five distinct sub-pools. Not four, not six, but five. Yes, there are only five causes of project failure and they are generic in nature. They apply to all projects everywhere. I call this the *Fail Trail*:

1. There's infinite optimism during the preparation phase

At the beginning of a project, it's perfectly logical that everyone is hopeful and optimistic. After all, what's the point of being pessimistic? We've only just begun and everything's possible, the sky is the limit. Still, already during this phase, we often fail to establish a mutually agreed frame of reference. The omission of 'mutual agreement' implies the existence of 'implicit misunderstanding'. The latter should never be allowed to exist, not on any aspect of a project whatsoever, not a one and not at any time.

2. Once we've started, we can't stop

Beter ten halve gekeerd dan ten hele gedwaald is a Dutch expression that roughly translates to 'Better to turn halfway then to wander astray', also known as 'a fault confessed is half redressed'. We know very well what it entails, but we flout it anyway. Oftentimes we start the execution phase prematurely, whilst there is still debate about the how, who, what, why and when. Subsequently, we start changing project assumptions, requirements and precautions as we go along, without knowing against which reference frame we're changing them (because we haven't got one). People start to notice that

things go wrong but, nevertheless, the whole thing barrels ahead. Repairs are done on the fly and all warning signs are lost in the wind.

3. We tackle the inevitable problems poorly

The more people that are involved in a project, the more personal opinions and temperament you insert, the bigger the chance of anomalies, deviations and problems. What is the definition of an 'anomaly' anyway, if we can't hold it against a fixed, mutually agreed frame of reference? And even when there *is* a fixed reference point, we still have the tendency to complain about all those óther problems that pop up randomly. Things are getting out of hand, we can see it, but we fail to analyze the situation to find the root cause, we don't isolate and segregate. Instead, we steam forwards, emotionally lingering in the chaotic world of symptoms fighting, simultaneously clouding reality and enhancing the chaos around us.

4. We don't act as true entrepreneurs

A project organization is nothing but a temporary business enterprise. All ingredients are present: planning, production and delivery, relationship management, marketing and sales, finance and control, structure and hierarchy, process and communication, leaders and followers, managers and employees. But what comes relatively easy to us in terms of running controlled business enterprise, we apparently start to lose our marbles as soon as we get pressured by a highly visible and clearly demarcated change process. We squander our ability to behave as true entrepreneurs, because we don't feel like we are owners of the process, let alone the project.

5. We don't evaluate, share and celebrate our experiences

At the bitter end of a chaotic project, we're exhausted. We'd prefer to be done with it as soon as possible, rushing our way to the next 'challenge'. Because we cherish the illusion that this time around, we *will* be successful. Thusly, we don't stop to consider what we've learned, and that is damned shame. Project evaluations provide us with useful information about how it all went down with man, method and machine. We as a human species are well equipped to learn from our mistakes, but when we don't evaluate our experiences, when we don't celebrate our successes and when we fail to share them, we are truly doomed to repeat our history. *Ad infinitum*.

So, there they are, the five true generic causes of project failure. We're getting closer to the truth, but, since we're in a process of analysis, we're not done asking questions. Because each of these five causes can now be paired with a separate why-question:

– *Why are we so infinitely optimistic?*
– *Why can't we stop once we've started?*
– *Why do we tackle the inevitable problems so poorly?*
– *Why don't we act as true entrepreneurs?*
– *Why don't we evaluate, share and celebrate our experiences?*

The answers to these prying questions will automatically bring us to the next level as we move upwards in the Seven-Tiered Hourglass.

Level -1: Actual problems

By answering why-questions meticulously, the 'infinite' number of symptoms we found at the bottom of our parking garage and the five subsequent generic causes of project failure that we discovered one level up, can be further reduced to just three generic problem areas: leadership, maturity and resilience.

Problem 1: Leadership

For simplicity's sake, I distinguish just two kinds of leaders here: the *natural*, barricade type leader and the follower that (hopefully) strives to be, at the very least, a *personal* leader. With the first kind I target the type of leadership and management that we covet desire, the type of leaders and managers in which we put our trust to make our projects a success. They provide the foundation that allows others to be successful. With the second kind I describe everyone involved in a project that doesn't have a leadership type function, but undergoes this constant struggle, fighting off the damaging consequences of a *lack of leadership*, to avoid personal suffering.

Leadership problems manifest themselves vertically within all layers of the project organization (*the chain of command*) and horizontally throughout all steps of the process (*the supply chain*). You will not find an issue or problem in a project that isn't in some way or another related to poor leadership, which is a clear hint of what we're going to find in the center of the hourglass. Just bear with me.

LEADERSHIP IN PRACTICE

Ralph is a junior project manager and he recently earned hirst first project management certificate. Now he is joining his first project board meeting. His PowerPoint presentation is top notch, he feels, and he thought of every detail. He takes one last glance at the pile of exception reports in front of him, which has cost him blood, sweat and tears to assemble. He has meticulously collected and captured the project's problems and issues in a smashing spreadsheet. Just before Ralph left his office, his project team has told him – plead to him – that if no decisions are made, the project will come to a grinding halt. So, this truly is an important steering group meeting. In fact, it's now or never!

But the meeting starts off way too late. The executive did not draft an agenda. There are no minutes from the last meeting. The project board is incomplete. Smartphones, laptops and tablets are constantly in use. The board members like to hear themselves speak a lot and they are extrovert, dominant and strongly opinionated. But some of them aren't even members of the board, they have invited themselves. At random, one specific detail after another is exhaustively discussed. No decisions are made, no notes are taken and the discussions lead nowhere. More importantly: nobody does anything substantial; nobody intervenes, it just goes on and on.

Ralph is caught in the undercurrent. He's hesitant, doesn't dare to bud in. Because what they are saying all sounds very important and he's a little

intimidated by all these 'big' personalities. But the clock is relentless: tick, tack, tick, tack… Then, suddenly, the meeting is over and before he knows it, he's out there in the hallway again with his laptop, his exception reports and his spreadsheet. What awaits him is a long walk back to his teammates who are eagerly awaiting him. Because he promised them decisions, agreements and solutions without which the project cannot proceed. He was going 'to take care of things', he said. 'Trust me!'

Problem 2: Maturity

When it comes to maturity I also, for the sake of simplicity, distinguish two types: one of overall collaboration (organizations, departments, projects) and one of the individuals therein (the collaborating person or 'the project person'). As we will discover in Chapter 4, organizational maturity can be measured 'vertically' (up and down the chain of command, on individual level and on group level) and horizontally (from left to right across the entire supply chain). So, individuals have a personal level of maturity ánd are constantly, either aware or unaware, confronted with the level of (im)maturity that surrounds them.

Problems with organizational maturity primarily manifest themselves in the discrepancy, the tension field or friction between the various maturity levels, horizontally, vertically and between separate entities. These differences exist for example between the various organizational components of a project (different teams and expertise groups), between individuals, within the project in its entirety and between the subsequent phases within the supply chain of a project (preparation, execution, transfer, closure). The larger these differences,

the more tension and friction tend to accumulate and the greater the chance of problems, issues, crisis and subsequent project failure.

MATURITY IN PRACTICE

Tim is a congenial but ambitious 30-year-old senior project manager, who has sunk his teeth into a challenging change process. He's leading a large project team with 150 members that will provide 20,000 managers and employees of a large nationwide ICT company with a new version of an office software package. Because the company is under strict austerity, the project has a limited budget and hopes to save costs by having the employees replace the software themselves on their PC or laptop, under limited supervision. Forty 'logistic centers' have been set up throughout the country for employees to visit. From an organizational as well as a logistical point of view, it is extremely demanding and complex.

After several months of careful preparation, during which the entire process is worked out in detail, fine-tuned and automated, he summons the steering group to attend a 'Go / No Go' meeting. Up until then, the steering group has been regularly and carefully updated by Tim and all have agreed with the set-up and progress so far. At this point in time a critical decision is required to agree on a project start date and to initiate the formal communications to more than fifty departments. The steering committee convenes, listens to Tim's presentation about the project status and precisely at that moment when mutual agreement is required, it happens.

One of the steering committee members, the executive and chairman, interrupts Tim. He just got a great idea. 'Can't we just implement this with 'punch cards' and 'workstations'? Just provide everybody with a little punch card of some sort and have them 'check in' wherever, I don't know. Something like that, maybe?' Tim is completely caught off guard. He's simply flabbergasted. He stares at the chairman, like having an embolism, unable to utter a word. Working like a dog for months, taking countless setbacks, spending heaps of money, having a staff of 150 ready and able to act, all communication protocols carefully prepared, everyone informed, and then this happens. Just when he's about to open his mouth, support is offered. But not for Tim.

'Yeah, thát's an excellent idea!' yells out the second member of the steering committee. 'Cool. That would make things much easier. Great idea! Tim, my man, can you take care of that for us, please?' The third member of the steering group nods in agreement fanatically. But Tim, coming to his senses, adamantly protests. He points at all the agreements already made, all the commitments already given. That this is called a 'Go / No Go' for a reason. He raises his voice, repeats his arguments. But it doesn't matter because the chairman has yet another brilliant idea: 'Be that as it may, I say, let's vote on it! Who's in favor of my idea?' All three members of the steering committee raise their hands, looking at Tim triumphantly. And then the chairman says, without so much as blinking his eyes: 'Seems like we have a majority here, Tim. It is therefore decided by popular vote: proposal accepted. Get to it!'

Problem 3: Resilience

In the context of collaboration, I describe resilience as everyone's ability (and obligation) to lift a finger (or the hand that comes with it) as soon as a project starts to smell. Even when our leaders and managers fail us, or when we fall prey to large differences in maturity levels, we don't have to accept it, to just roll over and die. We don't have to go down without a fight. *All behavior constitutes consequences* and by taking an assertive, resilient posture, we are not only protecting ourselves against harm, but we are also standing up for our co-workers, our organization, our clients and customers and, of course, for the overarching goals of the project itself.

RESILIENCE IN PRACTICE

These are some of the comments I wrote down while auditing a large international project, with a budget of tens of millions of euro's and already running in its sixth month of execution:

'... yeah, we should have figured that out by now...'
'... I just go my merry way ...'
'... I am constantly trying to add structure myself...'
'... the steering group still has to give their little stamp of approval ...'
'... at this point it is unclear who's doing what...'
'... those decisions haven't been made yet...'
'... these are implicit assumptions ...'
'... what I miss is some kind of plan of what

the heck we're supposed to do ...'
'... we have no control over the cost ...'
'... it would be nice if we were to somehow er, freeze that ...'
'... all teams are pursuing their own goals ...'
'... at some point we need to address that sensibly ...'
'... everyone is doing their project work on top of everything else ...'

During these kind of audit meetings, usually with only me and the auditee, I wonder in silent amazement. Because everybody seemed to know very well what was wrong all along, but nobody lifted a finger and nobody said anything, apart from the daily nagging and whining about the chaos and the lack of progress. When I finally ask about it, this is what I usually get back some way or another:

'… as long as my team leader doesn't do anything,
I just muddle through … '
'… it's up to management to take care of that …'
'… it's not my call to remedy that …'
'… I've got more important things to do than
ringing the alarm bells all the time …'
'… that is not my responsibility …'
'… well yeah, you know, it's just….it always goes like this,
I simply don't know any better …'

Problems with resilience surface when a project clearly and visibly derails, with all the writing on the wall, and no one, not vertically in the chain of command,

nor horizontally in the supply chain, lifts a finger, let alone raises a hand (or dares to speak). The longer this collective hesitation lasts, the bigger the chaos is going to be and the smaller the chances of success.

And this, my project friends, brings us to the tipping point: the exact midpoint of the Seven-Tiered Hourglass. Countless symptoms have translated into five generic causes that can be reduced to only three actual problems: *leadership, maturity and resilience*. But we're still only halfway, we must keep going. Because when push comes to shove, there's only *one* entity that is ultimately responsible. There's simply no escaping it and you're probably very familiar with that entity, because you are part of it, you are surrounded by it and you áre it.

Level 0: People as tipping points

Smack down in the middle of the Seven-Tiered Hourglass you will find the tipping point of success and failure, the pivotal juncture between Fail Trail and the Cycle of Success. After all, where do all these problems with leadership, maturity and resilience originate? There's only one possible answer and by now tou probably won't be surprised: *it's the people, stupid!* We, mankind, the human species in its entirety; it's been ús all along.

We, the people, are the mother of all fuckups.

Only when we figure out what makes people tick, what makes us do the things that we do, what explains the total mess we get ourselves into, we can start working on the solutions of our project problems. We need to go pass Level Zero, pass that tipping point, to start our journey towards the Perfect Project.

Level +1: the real solutions

Leadership, maturity, and resilience are human trades. You and I, all of us, we *ourselves* are at the root of both our successes and our failures. Only when we manage to climb out of the mud pit of symptoms fighting (by not only looking beyond, but also *above* the shape of our project nose), we can start to make some mileage. We must turn the knobs of these three human trades, convert the three problems into three mirrored solutions.

- Lack of *leadership* we correct by redistributing our leaders and followers.
- Lack of *maturity* we correct by acknowledging our human limitations.
- Lack of *resilience* we correct by stimulating the personal leader within ourselves.

But if we want to do all of that, we'll have to snap into gear. Let's move on.

Level +2: Actions and the Cycle of Success

At level Minus 2 we were introduced to the Fail Trail. How do we break through a vicious circle? How do we convert generic causes of project failure into solution-oriented actions? We can do this simply by 'positive-mirroring' the Fail Trail, which will then turn into a *Cycle of Success*:

- *Don't rush into your project.*
- *Dare to stop when it goes haywire.*
- *Address the inevitable problems at the root.*
- *Act as a true entrepreneur.*
- *Evaluate, share and celebrate your experiences.*

And yes, as the evidence shows, that's easier said than done. So, I will dedicate each of the following five chapters to one of these success elements. It will take us from fighting symptoms to prevention, from causes to actions and from problems to solutions. In short, we will go from botched up projects to perfect projects. The tips and tricks in this book are ultimately intended to 'unmask' your botched up project: to timely intervene and to prevent it from sliding into the abyss of perpetual failure. And that, my project pals, brings us to the highest level of the hourglass, the top floor, out in the sun, where we can smell the project roses and feel the warm summer breeze of success.

Level +3: Prevention and the Perfect Project

'If we fail to learn from our history, we are doomed to repeat it' (thanks again, George Santayana). Evidently, we're pretty familiar with chaos and experienced at failing, because as project management goes, we botch up two thirds of all projects, everywhere and every time. And without prevention, we keep regressing rapidly, forced down by gravity into that traitorous pitfall of symptoms fighting, at the bottom of the Fail Trail. Fighting symptoms and botched up projects are as much associated to each other as the Perfect Project is to the Power of Prevention. We can only shed our catastrophic behavior when we learn to master the conversion of problems into solutions, inertia into action and chaos into structure.

In the following chapters I will disclose 10 ways to unmask your botched up project:

1. *The Project Match Test*
2. *The PRIC-lists*

3. *The STOP-principle*
4. *The Status Totalus*
5. *The Anti-Botch-up Quadrant*
6. *The Problem Analysis Checklist*
7. *Think-Tanking with Brainpower*
8. *The Project Botch-up Test*
9. *The Seven Consultation Questions*
10. *The Success Analysis Checklist*

The integrated application of these 10 tips and tricks will ensure that you will never be lost for words and always find opportunities to intervene.

Please bear in mind that I am not going to explain to you what you have to do áfter you have intervened in a botched up project. I am not going to tell you how to proceed, because you can learn all that at Project Management School. Clever minds have dedicated their entire lives to come up with the perfect methodology to create perfect problems. Once you have discovered how to maintain a Cycle of Success, you only have to follow the infinite wisdom of *Prince2*, *PMBoK*, *IPMA*, *Agile*, *Lean* and *Scrum*. Just don't rush into them.

CHAPTER 1

DON'T RUSH INTO YOUR PROJECT

At the beginning of every project, we are ambitious, enthusiastic and good-spirited, but right afterwards the shit hits the fan. Luckily, there's hope. Because we can put the right leader in the right spot, lift our finger when we smell something fishy and stimulate the sales department to cool it on their gung-ho sales pitches.

About the energy management of a project

You're probably all too familiar with it: the *get go* for the project has been given and the endeavor now bares a name. The *kick-off meeting* has provided some sense of purpose, direction and urgency. A team has been put together, everybody is up to the challenge and it is now vital to get things sorted before the project can go into execution mode. People feel optimistic, enthusiastic and full of hope towards a good outcome. The finish line is far away in the future – 'oh, we've got plenty of time!' – which amplifies the impression that everything is going to be all right. The project team, full of energy, starts running and before you know it, everyone has forgotten that the preparatory phase is a project in its very own right. Only at the end of the sub-project called

'preparation' the sub-project called ‘execution’ may start. By that time, all that prep work must result in a formal *go for launch*, or for that matter, the project enters the *Go / No Go decision process*.

According to project management theory, an iron clad, fixed landmark must exist between preparation and execution of a project. In reality, that milestone is often a moving target. Sometimes there’s no landmark at all. Those kind of projects dive into the execution phase directly and the preparatory activities are ‘simply’ carried out in parallel, ‘*on the fly’*.

That, my dear project friends, you may call, at least according to project methodology doctrine, a true contradiction in terms. Because that milestone, the ‘landmark’ between preparation and execution, should in fact be a heavily guarded fortress wall, with archers between the battlements and a heavily barricaded gate, through which you are only allowed to pass when you have done your project homework. However, in practice, that ‘wall’ is oftentimes merely a little overgrown border pole that you may find somewhere in the thicket, if you can find it, and is therefore easily ignored.

The definition of a crisis

You are in a crisis if you can’t say ‘that’s water under the bridge’.

If you set the total amount of human energy in a project at 100% (in which I define 'human energy' as the sum of all possible human actions, exchanges and associations between start-up and closure) then the proper proportions should be 50/20/30. Half of all the energy should be spent on good prep work, after

which you only need 20% to execute the project. The remaining 30% of energy you then spend on the evaluation of the unexpected, but inevitable problems, accidents and incidents that you have encountered whilst dealing with *man, method and machine* under great pressure.

The reality is, I'm afraid, quite different. Typically, the percentual energy ratio of a botched up project is 5/95/0! The amount of prep work is negligible because well, just admit it, 'we're in an awful lot a hurry and therefor started to run before we could walk'. All energy is spent on the execution phase, in which we chase wild gooses, fight symptoms and suffer hard as a result. At the end of the ride everybody is só worn out and só relieved the project is over, that there is no energy, initiative or intention left for an evaluation of the disastrous event. Because by then, such a *lessons learned session* no longer serves anybody's purpose, thereby closing the vicious circle. As a direct result, by the time we engage in our next project management endeavor, all the misery will start from scratch yet again.

The Project Match Test: Put the right leader in the right place

What is required to establish and respect that milestone, that fortress wall between preparation and execution? How do we avoid incorrectly defining goals and deliverables, spending too little time on structure, planning and budget and having everybody running around like headless chickens? The answer is obvious: it requires true leadership and it must be there at the right time and at the right place.

Tom is a 42-year-old, highly experienced senior project manager. He's been

asked to replace a colleague in a project that's in distress. A large chemical multinational has applied to have an update done of the interface between two mutually dependent automation systems, upgrading both systems to the latest ICT standards. One system produces the documents that are required to accompany the finished product and the other is driving the production process. Nothing can leave the factory without these essential documents because most products are extremely toxic and flammable.

A calamity during transport or storage would not only cause considerable damage to the physical premises of the business; it would also severely damage the company's reputation. If such an event took place, the shareholders would not be happy campers, to say the least. Therefore, the 'interphase upgrade project' has been scheduled in such a way that it must be completed well in advance of the publication of the company's annual financial report. The whole world is watching, so to speak.

At first glance, it looks like an easy peasy job: six weeks throughput time, a project team of 20 part-timers, with a budget slightly under 100.000 euros. Therefor a junior project manager is assigned to the project, because, so it is believed, 'it will be some good experience for him'. However, nobody has thought about the actual impact in case of failure.

As it turns out, the junior project manager fails dramatically and the project goes haywire. Apparently, on analysis, nobody studied the complexity and risk factors of the project at great depth, falling victim to oversimplification. But now the presentation of the financial annual report is nearing fast. Tests and probes are done and what do they indicate? The interface doesn't work! There is no fallback scenario; they cannot revert to an earlier version of the

system. And nobody can say when it will be up and running again, because there is a total lack of overview. People start arguing, then bickering, fingers get pointed at scapegoats and everybody is stressed out to the max. The management team and executive board are getting anxious, because their bonuses and careers are on the line. In short: Panic with a capital P.

Tom, the senior project manager who is responsible for cleaning up this mess, quickly figures out where the rub is. The complexity and the required throughput time were underestimated. The junior project manager was not able to assess these facts correctly and mitigate them. Besides, Tom realizes, the actual risks involved were completely misjudged. If the enormous impact in case of failure was acknowledged at the initial stage of the project, it would have been more prudent to assign a senior project leader (or higher) from the get go. In that case, nobody would have had any reason to be nervous, including the shareholders.

In the end Tom manages to finalize the project just in time. The interface works. Pfew! But the project in its entirety takes a total of five months (almost four times as long), takes up twice as much expensive full-time specialists, costs more than half a million euros (almost six times the amount budgeted) and, because word got out, the company's reputation has been badly tarnished. A high price to pay for something that could have easily been avoided.

Here's how:

Step 1: Determine the specific density of your project

To determine the specific density of a project, you need to interconnect four

basic elements of a project: time, money, people and impact. Our gut instincts have a tendency to determine the ‘density’ of a project based on throughput time and costs alone. If it’s short and costs little, we intuitively say it's a 'small' project and label it ‘light’. If it’s long and costs a lot, likewise, we consider it to be a 'big' project and consider it ‘heavy’. But there’s something ominous about this instinctive approach. These two elements in and of itself don’t say much, they are incomplete at best. Two major components are missing.

People

With every human being added to a collaboration, the intrinsic complexity doesn’t increase linearly, but exponentially. Yes indeed, we, the people, are the mother of all fuckups. Each individual contributor added, brings a unique combination of personality traits and behavioral characteristics to the mix. Two individuals know more than one, for sure. But in a project team with two team members the decision process is already more difficult than if it was just you alone. The first thing that starts to decay is the overview. With every subsequent individual added, you will also add differences in character, level of knowledge, attitude, good and bad habits, cognitive perception and behavioral characteristics. And with every added person the disrupting effects grow stronger exponentially.

People add new dimensions to a project: uniqueness, but also unpredictability and capriciousness. With every new individual added there is greater risk that things will go haywire. The overall impact will increase as well, simply because it affects more people. The mitigation process of chaos, chance, accident and bad luck in general and project risks in particular is limited, but proper leadership recognizes and reins it, anticipates it and controls it. Therefore,

when sizing up a project and when searching for the right type of leader for the job, we must take the 'human factor', apart from time and money, far more seriously than we're used to. But even that is not enough.

Impact

What is the organizational risk when the project fails dramatically? What is the *factual impact*, in other words, what happens if the change is nót implemented? Will the organization still be able to operate? What is the dependency on this specific change project? What will the future hold when this project isn't able to finish on time? Those are important questions to ask.

Throughput time, costs and people alone are meaningless without the factor risk / impact. As we have learned, a 'trivial little project' can unleash enormous disasters, whilst a relatively expensive long-term change program may be canceled just like thát, without causing as much as a ripple in the ocean (with, perhaps, the exception of a few bruised egos here and there and maybe an irritating cost gap in that year's finances). The impact of potential failure múst be brought into the bigger scheme of things. This factor 'weighs' considerably more than the first three factors combined and may be squared easily. It's comparable to what you do when you anticipate a level 9 earthquake on the Richter scale: extremely low probability, extremely high impact.

Step 2: Introducing the top leader and the super-conductor

The higher the specific density of a project, the greater the 'weight' of a project leader must be and the more demand must be laid down on natural leadership qualities. We're all used to this standard classification: *junior project manager, medior project manager, and senior project manager*. I believe it's time for

an overhaul of that concept. Firstly, contradictory as it may sound, in the project management business you don't need managers, you need leaders. Secondly, we're going to need a new classification that adds and integrates two more variants. From now on, for each project, there should be five 'types' of project *leaders* available, starting with the most commonly used classification:

– *Type 1: The junior project leader*
– *Type 2: The medior project leader*
– *Type 3: The senior project leader*

Nothing new here, apart from the substitution 'leader' for 'manager'. But two indispensable type of leaders need to be added:

– *Type 4: The top leader*
– *Type 5: The super-conductor*

The top leader

The *top leader* in projects is the proverbial bridge between senior project leader and super-conductor. If you don't want to play your trump card yet and a project is apparently too heavy and too risky for even the best senior project leader, then the top leader is the smart way to go. He exceeds the senior project leader both in experience and expertise, however, even at that level he is not capable of the ultimate tour the force:

The super-conductor

Every organization should be willing, if the situation requires, to play the

trump card, the ultimate joker, the Superman of Projects, the top of the bill, state of the art, top notch crusader: the *super-conductor*. Superconductivity is described as the phenomenon where the electrical resistance of some materials, usually at very low temperatures, disappears completely. When a current is initiated in a closed circuit that consists of superconducting material, it will continue to flow without electrical charge, which will subsequently induce a permanent magnetic field. I find that an excellent metaphor! Super-conductors connect people by their magnetic appeal, dissolve resistance and therefore deliver permanent connection at minimal opposition. And just like actual superconductivity, it takes a lot of energy to keep that process going.

Human super-conductors are a rare bread and they are expensive for sure, but they go in and get the job done where others fail hopelessly. Use them sparingly, but if the situation really requires these superman-type-leaders, don't hesitate to invest the required capital and get them on board as soon as possible.

ELEVEN THOUSAND COMPUTER PROBLEMS

It's 2013 and for more than two and a half years, the Erasmus Medical Center in Rotterdam, the Netherlands, is in financial chaos caused by severe computer problems. With 11,000 employees it is one of the largest hospitals in the world and most of the time it has no clue about how much money is going in and out, how many staff are employed and what they earn, the newspaper Het Financiële Dagblad says based on internal documents. The unclarity spans hundreds of millions of euros.

The problems started in early 2010 after a new computer system was implemented. Around that time, construction on an extensive renovation of the hospital began as well, costing 1,2 billion euros. The lack of financial oversight makes the hospital susceptible to fraud, so warned the accountancy firm Ernst & Young in a report. Building contractors supposedly took advantage of the chaos and swindled the hospital, resulting in cost overruns of as much as 30%.

Exceptional situations require exceptional leadership. But don't fret, because with your choice of junior, medior and senior project leaders, around 80% of all project cases can be dealt with. However, for the remaining 20% of 'special projects' you'll need to call upon the 'specials' in project leadership: the top leader (in 15% of cases) and the super-conductor (in the remaining 5% of cases). Considering the enormity and increasing complexity of today's projects, you can't pull it off with only 'standard' solutions. When the conventional project hierarchy can't handle the heat in the kitchen, top leaders and super-conductors will turn the tide. Everybody else should bud out and let them do their thing.

Now, you probably say: 'But top leaders and super-conductors are an enormously rare breed and therefore hugely expensive!' That's right. But that shouldn't be a consideration: when push comes to shove, the investment in leadership upfront covers only a fraction of the financial hemorrhage that a failing project will cause in the long run. Why would you waste enormous amounts of money and energy down the line, if you only need a fraction of that at the beginning to *avoid* all that hassle? In other words: instead of a penny-wise, pound-foolish approach, it's better to spend tens of thousands (or even

hundreds of thousands) of euros upfront to save millions (or billions) of euros later. Who would nót want that?

There should be no financial limitations to the deployment of top leaders and super-conductors if the situation so requires. With the money we collectively safe (imagine saving millions or even *billions* of euros indeed), we could, on a smaller scale, invest in our employees and improve working conditions, or, on a larger scale, reverse countless government cutbacks on education, health care and social security. Why waste it if you can safe it?

Step 3: Do the Project Match Test

Depending on the specific density of a project, the five leadership types must be properly assigned to a project. A short-term 'cheap' project might very well be assigned to a 'heavy weight' leader, whilst a long-term 'expensive' project could as well be supplied to a 'light weight' type of leader. Reasoning that way, we can derive five categories of projects, equated to five types of project leader, as follows:

Specific density	*Type of project*	*Type of leader*
< 10	Light, small, low risk	1
10 to 20	Average size, weight and risk	2
20 to 40	Heavy, large and high risk	3
40 to 70	Extremely heavy, extremely large and extremely high risk	4

> 70	Maximum weight, maximum size and maximum risk	5

In the *Project Match Test,* which takes only a few minutes to complete, each type of leader is paired with a specific profile sketch. With the increasing 'weight' of the leader, you will need more true and natural leadership. First you determine the specific density of a project, then you match it with the required 'weight' of the project leader. By doing so you will not only prevent under or over qualification of your leaders, but you will also prevent the project from going off track with all consequences due. Now honestly ask yourself: why *wouldn't* you want that?

THE PROJECT MATCH TEST

Would you like to know the specific density of your project and which type of leader is the most suitable to it? Do you want to increase your project success rate significantly?

Go to **www.hetperfecteproject.nl** and do the Project Match Test!

The PIVOT-lists

Congratulations and welcome to the project! You are a proud project team member now and you have joined a brand-new change endeavor, that is well

underway. Everyone around you has enthusiastically started the work, and now you can too. Project goals appear to be set, organizational charts are floating by, there are lively conversations about content, technology and process and emails are flying around like crazy. All in all it appears to suggest a certain accuracy and it smells like some idea of a goal-oriented approach, but your gut feeling disagrees. Something's not right; it feels icky.

Now, how are you able to find out what the *real* status is? What kind of project is this (friend or foe?) and where is it headed? Whether you are a team member, staff member, team leader, project leader or crisis manager, you can quickly and easily determine the real and actual status of any project. It is just a matter of asking the right questions. But what questions are they? Well, you've got to raise your finger first.

The following two lists of questions I call PIVOT-lists, abbreviated from *Project Inquiry Vetting On Target*. I have deliberately added the word 'vetting', because by asking critical questions, you will deliberately confront colleagues and managers with reality. In other words: you're performing the art of *frontal confrontation with information*. Don't be timid: after all, you are not the one claiming the project is 'under control' without supplying evidence; you want it to be a success as much as the next guy. The only thing you are going to do is to ask some kind questions to determine the actual chances of success. By raising your finger, you're sort of 'pivoting your project', you're 'infiltrating the appearance of order'. In other words, you're using your poking, probing finger as a thermometer.

Asking questions has consequences. The answers given are indicative of the actual project status, but at the same time the *absence* of answers is highly

indicative of a masked botched up project. Therefore, the more project participants use these PIVOT-lists, the better the understanding of the actual status of the project, in real life, that is to say, in practice, not in theory. And the more often you ask these questions, the more it will invoke problem analysis and improvement plans. Your finger can truly make the difference.

The Duration of Recovery Law

The time it takes to restore something is inversely proportional to the time it took to cause the damage.

Be prepared that your role as 'inquirer', as investigator of sorts, can be construed as a big nuisance. You are going to ask open questions that cannot be answered with a simple 'yes' or 'no'. We hate that. As you probably already figured out, chaos is allergic to inquiry, it deflects it, fears it, dodges it. Therefore, your posture must be one of integrity, strength and resilience. Powering through is an art form; it requires a solid amount of willpower. Remember, the only thing you are doing is checking out the reality about all that project chatter. You're just trying to find out the level of bullocks in all that management talk. You're just curious.

The PIVOT-list 'Basic'

The questions on this checklist are generic in nature and address the project *in its entirety*. The answers will determine the strength of the project's foundation. Can most of these basic questions be answered at all? Does the project have legitimacy and if so, what is the added value? Here we go:

1. Why does this project exist?

You can also ask what the goal is, what it will yield or what the added value is. Sometimes the term 'business case' is applied. It is nothing more than supplying proper evidence that the project will have added value to the business process, that it is ultimately useful. Some methodologies (like for instance Prince2) are relentless in that respect: 'if there is no business case, there is no project!' A solid start is half the work done.

→ **TIP:** Ask for a concrete underpinning of the existence of the project to check its legitimacy. A good business case is concise, explicit in its motives, backed with verifiable calculations and laced with solid sources and references.

PROJECT SURVIVAL TIPS

Does this sound familiar? The project has turned into a disaster zone and you're up to your eyeballs in damage control. What must you do?

Don't get wound up

There's absolutely no point in trying to satisfy everyone. You'll never succeed. It will result in an excess of parallel tasks and you can't beat chaos. The more working hours you spend to keep up, the sooner you end up in a vicious cycle of busy-busy-busyness. Instead, spend fewer hours, shed some less vital tasks since you're packed with work already. If the how-, what-, where-, when- and why-questions aren't clear yet, spend more time on that. Take your time to chart out your own situation in time and place.

The only way to do that, is to regularly withdraw from all the busyness. Take your distance from the hectic project environment; work from home for a day (or two) and think about it some more, go figure it all out. When you lose track, you lose it all. If you find yourself running around like a headless chicken, desperately trying to make it work, you are truly lost. Before you know it, you will have become a project zombie.

2. What are we going to do (and what are we nót going to do)?

This is commonly called the *scope* of the project. It describes what is included in the project. But that's not the whole deal. At least as important is a listing of elements that are nót included. Entire projects crash and burn on implicit assumptions about the scope: 'Oh, but I thought / I was convinced / I assumed that that was included…' So always ask about both.

→ **TIP:** The scope of a project can't be described as a simple line of text. A good scope entails a general description ánd an overview of all work packages included in the project. It entails the summation of specific tasks and activities, the workload, the capacity, the interrelationships between the various work packages, and how they relate to the greater whole.

3. How are we going to accomplish that?

Yet another simple question, but again the answer might proof not that simple at all. Each project contains, to a certain extent, some technology that requires functional or technical designs. The work packages that are derived from these designs, along with the roles and tasks that are associated with them, must be clearly defined and all 'new ways of working' must be captured.

→ **TIP:** Is the project in the execution phase? Then all accompanying documents must be in the 'final' status. Is the project in the preparation phase? Then a 'concept' status is allowed, however, it must be crystal clear when these documents are going to be delivered as ‘final’ in conjunction to the planned start date of the project. Don't let anyone fool you or misguide you; make sure they show you the documents on the spot.

4. Who's involved?

The answer to this question is not just the organizational chart of the project. It specifically includes áll parties involved: project organization, steering committee, sales managers, account managers, stakeholders, customer and end-users, etcetera. It involves everyone that is affected by the result of the project one way or another. Ask: who communicates with whom, why, when, where and how?

→ **TIP:** Don't be tempted by a list of merely roles and functions. Ask the names of specific people on key positions (for instance key team leaders and steering group members) and ask how much time they are going to free up for the project. Ask them when they have been – or when they are going to be – informed by whom and in what way on what is about to come.

5. How long will it take?

This question entails far more than just the start and end date. It defines all milestones in between: the start and finish date of preparation, execution and closure stages, serial and parallel activities and all the 'Go / No Go' thresholds. It is the Master Plan, the Timeline of Timelines. It will also have to provide answers to how much leeway-time and other reserves have been built into the project.

→ **TIP:** At this level, one sheet of paper should suffice. Don't be distracted by too much detail. With one glance, you must be able to see what must be dealt with sequentially and what may run in parallel. If the planning is brimmed with complexity and ambiguity just say: 'I don't get it. Can you explain it to me again? Can you draw me a simple *one-view-one-take* picture of it please?'

6. What does it cost?

A professional project is composed entirely, from top to bottom, out of work packages (thank you Prince2!). Each individual work package consists of tasks, hours, and costs and therefore represents a value in time and money. The other cost is 'overhead': leadership, management, staff and so on. Work packages and overhead together equate to the total workload ánd the total budget of the project. This must be made clear very easily.

→ **TIP:** Across the entire project budget, a reserve should be built in, because problems are inevitable and unforeseen circumstances are guaranteed to emerge. A margin of 10% to 20% elbow room in the budget is not unusual. Explicitly request for the management summary of the budget including this leeway. This should also easily fit on one sheet of paper.

7. In what way have the risks been mapped?

Think of all the potential threats to the project. How likely is it that a disrupting event will take place (probability) and what are the subsequent consequences (impact)? Which preventive measures (mitigation) are being taken for each type of risk? What happens when the shit hits the fan? All projects, large and small, have risks and Murphy's Law guarantees that a percentage of these will turn into (mini-)disasters. A viable project has the most important risks lined up upfront, for anyone to see.

→ **TIP:** Risk management is in a league of its own. The larger and more complex a project becomes, the greater the risks. Sometimes a full-time risk manager is required. Don't be intimidated by spreadsheets or PowerPoint slides. Ask: 'What happens if ...?' and dig deeper. Also ask for the project's worse-case scenario and the mitigation thereof. Without (some form of) risk management, there is no project!

The PIVOT-list 'Organization'

This checklist is generically *managerial* or *governmental* in nature and addresses anyone's specific role within the project, including yours. Do you understand what everyone is doing? Do you understand your own part in all this? Do the others understand it themselves? Of course, there is some overlap with the *PIVOT-list 'Standard'*, however, the primary focus of the *PIVOT-list 'Organization'* is on how the project is organized and how it is supposed to operate as a 'human collaborative entity'. You're factually testing whether this temporary undertaking can run successfully at all and, more specifically, what your own chances of survival are. Let's go:

1. What is the structure of the project?
You're not asking for some vague sketch with a few boxes, lines and arrows here. You are asking for an organizational chart that is tangible and comprehensive, a hierarchy in the shape of a rake. Ask where you fit in this organizational chart and who your direct contacts are. And where does the interviewee fit in all this? Ask what happens when things get escalated up the *chain of command* and beware: don't accept project staff or management to exist in 'isolated floating boxes'. Walk through the structure of the project organization together, step by step, bottom to top. The more dotted lines, circle

references, question marks and open spaces the structure reveals, the worse state the project is in.

→ **TIP:** Don't only ask for the organizational chart of your own project organization. On the other side of the fence, you are dealing with the customer and end user, who have just as much interest in the effectiveness of the project. Ask about the relationship between these two organizations. Compare the two organizational charts side by side, level by level, so you can observe how the various parts are related to each other horizontally. Which people are at the same hierarchical level? Who are the head honchos of both organizations?

2. Who replaces whom?

Ask the person you are interviewing about backups: who replaces him when absent? Ask who your own backup is: who is supposed to cover for you when you are absent? Ask for the replacements for all key positions in the organizational chart: project manager, team leaders, staff members and steering committee members. Where is the project staff vacation planning and how does this effect the throughput time? For instance, March-April or September-October are scheduled very differently than July-August. During the Summer Holiday period, project capacity can easily drop to less than half. Has that been considered into the overall project plan?

→ **TIP:** This is not meant to have all roles performed by two individuals: it's not about full redundancy. It is meant to ensure the continuity of a temporary enterprise. It's about answering the question 'who will replace me when I'm absent?' A good project will always take this into account and will have clearly identified backups for all key roles. The fewer back-up positions there are, the more unstable the project. It's just asking for trouble.

TOP TEN RARE PROJECT QUOTES

1. 'That was my fault, sorry'.
2. 'I didn't handle that correctly, I apologize'.
3. 'I should have told you that in advance, my bad.'
4. "I acted forceful and rude; I shouldn't have said it like that'.
5. 'That wasn't very nice of me, it won't happen again'.
6. 'I shouldn't have confronted you in public, I'm sorry for that'.
7. 'Sorry I answered the phone while we were talking, that was rude of me'.
8. 'Apologies that I'm so awfully late again, I will organize myself better'.
9. 'It's my fault; I take full responsibility'.
10. 'This is my mistake, you don't have to do anything about it, I will take care of it'.

3. Where's the Master Plan?

Ask for an overview of the Master Plan or Grand Timeline stipulated with the most important substantive components of the project. Don't accept stacks of crinkled-up Excel spreadsheets or accumulated scraps of paper. If the main timeline can't fit onto a single sheet of paper, then there ís no plan. Ask about your personal planning: where does your role fit in the greater scheme of things? But also: what happens if the project is ahead or behind schedule? Where are the 'Go / No Go' moments and how are they managed?

→ **TIP:** A solid plan takes only a few minutes to explain. The longer it takes to explain and the more questions induced, the worse state the project is in.

Pay special attention to the mistake of 'Single Line Serial Planning Without Leeway'; that's a recipe for disaster. It's perfectly fine to isolate an example of a sub-planning (for instance the one that specifically applies to you) and grind for details.

4. What do the work packages contain?

A fundamental approach to managing projects follows from the total amount of work packages (thanks again Prince2!) Nothing defines a project better than through these building blocks. One work package consists of one specific person-related duty package that is equated to hours and costs. Activities *do not, cannot, will not* exist outside a work package. In other words: if it is not defined in a work package somewhere, the activity doesn't exist. Ask about the relationship between the various work packages, both horizontally and vertically. Can you draw functional lines between them?

→ **TIP:** There must be work packages assigned to you, naturally. Ask specifically how they relate to other work packages and their owners inside and outside your own team. Are there no work packages defined for you? Then you don't exist within the project. Are there no work packages to be found in general? Then the project in its entirety doesn't exist. Be bold enough to just say that out loud. Ruffle some feathers.

5. What are the communication guidelines?

The formal 'chain of command' follows logically from the hierarchy stipulated in the organizational chart. A 'chain of command' is a military term that I like to use to describe the project hierarchy: from team member to team leader to project leader (to program manager) to steering committee and back again. The chain of command is particularly important when problems arise and

things become escalated. Nobody is allowed to go outside the chain of command; no one is allowed to circumvent the system. No exceptions! Furthermore: ask which rules, regulations and ethics apply to using email, telephone, smartphone, laptop, tablet and face-to-face communication and consultation.

→ **TIP:** Ask what happens when changes must be made to the project (change management) or when problems occur (problem management). Who communicates what to whom and when and in which way? What role does the customer, steering group, end user or other stake holders play? The less specific the rules for communication are, including the usage of our 'modern day gadgets' such as smartphones, tablets and laptops, the greater the chances of chaos and escalation.

6. What is the consultation structure?

This is again intertwined with the organizational chart: each level has its own consultation mechanisms. But who consults with whom, when, where and why, both internally and externally? How are the minutes logged? What is the duration of these meetings? Which standard agenda applies to every different kind of meeting? How does the steering committee communicate its findings to the rest of the project organization? Applying an efficient and effective consultation structure is a true art form. Meandering meetings on the other hand are like a malignant tumor that eats away at the foundation of your project.

→ **TIP:** This has nothing to do with bureaucracy. Each project requires a basic consultation structure and all project teams are connected through the continuous exchange of information. The vaguer someone is about the

consultation in projects ('that will take care of itself…' or 'we'll see about that as we go along'), the bigger the chaos will be. Having an ineffective, chaotic and unstructured consultation structure lies at the base of project failure and should be addressed and penalized accordingly.

7. What are we going to do with the inevitable problems on our path?

Two out of the three absolute certainties in life you're probably familiar with: death and taxes. The third might come as a surprise: *problems*, particularly problems in projects, for they are truly inevitable. Doing projects is all about dealing with the certainty of arising problems. How do we classify deviations, problems and issues? How to deal with incidents and accidents? What is the logging and analysis process? Who decides about it? What are the obstacles, the dependencies and the impossibilities of each issue? *Work The Problem, People!*

→ **TIP:** A solid project anticipates upcoming problems. Risks can be mapped out, but it is impossible to foresee in detail all possible co-operational problems and errors. Focus therefore on *the approach to* the problems: the process of addressing and solving them. That is the true strength of a collaboration. And don't worry about all the diversions and distractions in a project: embrace them, cherish them, engage them and get cracking solving them.

There you go: two PIVOT-lists to rock your project world. Whilst doing these kinds of 'interviews', stay frosty at all times, because after a jolly 'Good one…!', the following replies might also pop up:

– *'…we haven't got that figured out yet…'*

– *'...we're still working on that...'*
– *'...that's just a heartbeat from ready...'*
– *'...we only need to take a final closer look at it...'*
– *'...that's on its way...'*
– *'...I believe that is under construction as we speak...'*
– *'...I don't know. I'll have to check that...'*

In that case, show willpower and persistence and reply in a kind, yet persistent manor:

– *If you can't deliver it now, when can you?*
– *Who is working on it and when will it be ready?*
– *Alright then, show me some proof!*
– *Who still needs to review it?*
– *If you can't say now, when will you be able to say?*
– *Why don't you know that yet?*
– *What do you mean by that?*

Especially in the execution phase of a project, you must be relentless; half-baked answers are simply unacceptable. If solid, verifiable information is not available, when the appropriate documents cannot be produced, then the answer must be crossed out. Don't be fooled: if you're involved in a well-prepared, well-structured project, then you should get a fast answer to every question right away. Wham-bam! And with all the accompanying documentation too: cash on the barrel. Therefore, in addition to a verbal explanation on the spot, always ask for 'physical proof'. Don't accept any form of window dressing: call their bluff. You are in search of evidence and that

needs to be produced. In absence of evidence, you overrule the response and sound the alarm bells. And if you do, sound them hard.

PIVOT-lists by function of a thermometer

You can apply the PIVOT-lists for all types of projects: large or small, technical or procedural, local or international and regardless of business, branch or industry. Each list touches on the foundation of a project and simultaneously signifies the role that you play. It doesn't matter where your project process is at: in front or behind the fortress wall, that formidable bulkhead between preparation and execution.

No project management methodology will disagree with you: a project is only under control when all the prevailing questions are answered, captured and managed. You should therefore be – no – you *must* be extremely strict and relentless. It's the ultimate assertiveness test. If the answers given are evasive or vague, or if you don't get real answers at all, then there's something seriously wrong with the project in its entirety. Therefore, the following ruthless criteria apply to each PIVOT-list:

– 1 question or less incorrect or incomplete = Status *Green* = **GO**
– 2 questions incorrect or incomplete = Status *Orange* = **ON HOLD**
– 3 questions incorrect or incomplete = Status *Red* = **NO GO**
– 4 or more questions incorrect or incomplete = Status *Blood Red* = **CRISIS**

Make no mistake: this implies that if just two (!) questions do not produce satisfactory answers, the entire project must be put on hold (to execute corrections) and if more than two questions are unanswered, then the entire

project must be stopped (to go back to the preparation phase or to redo it completely).

In both cases, the pledged end date can no longer be guaranteed and that must be communicated to the steering group (and ultimately to the customer and the end-user community) immediately. If four or more questions have been either incorrectly or incompletely answered, then the project is in *crisis mode*: it can no longer be successful unless immediate action is taken. To put it in numbers: a project is only 'under control' when it scores (as a minimum) six out of seven questions right and that equals to a minimum score of 8,6 out of 10.

In case you get typical human responses such as...:

- *'That's not the way the cookie crumbles here!'*
- *'From which planet are you?'*
- *'If we have to do all that, then we'll never get started!'*
- *'Yeah, sure, but we also have to keep things going, ok?'*
- *'Let's not get too overly bureaucratic here, shall we?'*
- *'Come on, we have néver done projects like that over here!'*

...then you are experiencing a clear case of what I call 'gradual collaborative norm degradation'. In that case you must press down hard and relentlessly refer to the laws of Project Management Methodology that we learned in Project Management School, where everything is clear about what needs to be done when, where and how. Because you've already cut them lots of slack by allowing even óne question to be wrong.

Caution: using the words 'on hold', 'stop' and 'crisis' are taboo in the world of project management. The 'establishment', the steering group, executive board and management team members, the sales force and client managers, – they all get very nervous when they hear that. Nevertheless, all the project management analysis and statistics straight out of history prove that muddling through a project will cost way more than correcting and adjusting its flaws upfront. Projects can effortlessly go pear-shaped three times, regardless of their initial value.

Every year in the Netherlands alone, billions of euros evaporate into thin air because of failed ICT and infrastructure projects. We could do a lot of good elsewhere (education, health care, welfare) if we had access to that kind of money. The costs of intervention upfront will only amount to a small fraction of the potential total damage. For that reason, slowing down or even temporarily stopping a project is perfectly allowed, even if it appears 'way more expensive' or a 'bloody nuisance'. Prevention will always be less expensive than just muddling through and that is your strongest argument.

How do you unlearn a salesman's dirty tricks?

John is a sales director at a large ICT company. He oversees all project sales and conducts preliminary interviews with potential customers. Those are high-level meetings, lushed with steak dinners or while playing golf. At some point, since this is the project management business, a customer will ask: 'Say, if I might inquire, because that's all jolly good and dandy, but how long will a project like that take? And what kind of money are we talking about?'

Now, please stop and pause. Freeze frame and zoom in on the face of this sales

director who will do anything to reel in this ‘must win’ deal. His mouth is half-opened as he is about to give his eager answer. What would be the smart thing to say? The reasonable and sensible thing to say would be that ‘at this stage it is not possible to answer your questions, because each project has its own challenges’ and ‘I can only provide a first indication of throughput time and costs after consulting the engineers, project managers and other experts involved...’. Yep. That wóuld be swell and dandy. But what do you think the Johns of this world actually *will* say? Just push the play button!

'Oh, well ...' and John starts to pull one out of his quiver. '... You should think somewhere in the line of say, three to six months of work and it’ll cost you somewhere between 200 and 300K...'

As a project team member, team leader, project leader or program manager you have probably experienced it before: the project you have been assigned to is interesting in and of itself, fun and inspiring even, but it is sold for a price and delivery date that is way beyond unreasonable; it’s downright unrealistic. Subsequently, the first aspects that quickly start to wither away áre the interesting, fun and inspiring ones. It’s all just going to be one big run for your life.

Imagine working for a company where the mighty sales department sells projects enthusiastically for a price and delivery date só low and só short that in fact, at no time in history, these goals have ever been realized. In practice, it always takes longer and costs more. Imagine that this company apparently takes these considerable losses in time, money and effort for granted. And now imagine that same company continuously ignoring the signs on the wall, the objections, the human suffering and the desperate suggestions for

improvement. How would you change that? You would have to enter the soul of the sales rep who only cares about a quick win, so he can collect his bonus.

The next day, sales director John tells Kevin, a 36-year-old experienced project manager, about his meeting with the interested prospect. Kevin has been asked to take part in the bidding process, which provides him with the opportunity to share his experiences with tackling such complex projects. As a member of this interim quotation team, in addition to working with engineers and technical consultants, he will also inevitably have to deal with client managers, sales directors and sales consultants.

After Kevin hears what John told the customer on the golf course, he lets out a deep sigh. 'What do you think…', he utters in dismay, '…the customer hears when you put it like that? Right! He will hear the answer that is most beneficial for him: three months and 200.000 euros. We'll be at the losing end of the stick from day one!' That's right. And even worse, that wishful thought is engraved in the customer's mind all the time the bidding team is working on a substantiated proposal. Kevin knows there's no point in arguing, so he asks the consultants, engineers and other project experts to get cracking and, without pride or prejudice, simply lay the facts on the table. Perhaps the evidence speaks for itself. It soon becomes clear that such a project will take at least nine to twelve months and will cost at least 900.000 euros, in a best case scenario that is. Backed by his team, Kevin confronts John with these findings.

'That's simply unacceptable!' John cries in arrogance. 'You're going to have to reduce that by at least half!' Kevin replies that it would still mean five to six months throughput time and 400.000 euros in cost. But that it would still be

impossible to do based on the current scope of the project. Besides, the customer heard 'three months, 200.000 euros' and in the meantime, nobody has told him otherwise, so from a customer point of view, this impossibility is still twice as expensive and twice as time consuming as 'promised'. John replies: 'That's not my problem, this is an important account, I already cleared it with your supervisor, so, just do it'.

A THREE BILLION DOLLAR ALLOWANCE

Between 2002 and 2015, the Dutch national employment service UWV has paid three billion euros for ICT costs, a study by the Dutch newspaper *Eindhovens Dagblad* shows. And yet the agency is not able to keep even a stable website going. For some time already, the main entry website has been operating poorly and was even completely down for a few days in 2013. People were not able to apply for benefits or submit changes. According to annual reports, the UWV spends approximately a quarter of a billion euros yearly for automation. In 2012, it was 235 million euros. According to the UWV these high costs are 'due to the size and complexity of the work'. Data from 19,000 employees, 1,3 million customers, hundreds of thousands of unemployment submissions and terminations must be securely processed. The system processes 25,000 customer questions daily.

Ultimately, the entire project is sold, under protest, to the customer for a throughput time of four months, a price of 300.000 euros and with the scope unchanged. Indeed, it turns out to be impossible – facts and figures don't lie –

and as a result the project turns into a complete disaster. By the time it is finished, it has taken a year, filled with continuous tension, chaos, misery and stress, leaving behind an utterly dissatisfied customer and an exhausted project team.

The total costs have gone up to a million euros. The loss of 700.000 euros eats away the entire profit margin of the attached five-year ICT contract, but John is sales director and therefore – good for him – not accountable for the company's net profit, or for consequences of a botched up project. He collects his bonus on generated turnover only. Based on that premise, no single project stands a chance. And John? He's already fluttering off to the next 'must win' deal.

On steering with bonuses: Put more than just one carrot on a stick

Within a commercial organization, everyone who participates in the realization of projects will surely recognize it: the sales force will be judged primarily on gross turnover, the total of 'deals' they make at the very beginning of the supply chain. They are seldomly held accountable for the net result, the gained profit at the énd of that supply chain. Because of a lack of affiliation with the results of a project áfter it has been sold, it is a standard recipe for future botched up projects. After all, in this way, sales executives are not the least bit involved – let alone interested – in the supply chain *as a whole* and all the people therein. They can just keep on selling projects like hotcakes without having to worry about the consequences.

How can you break through such a well-known phenomenon? How do you get

these sales hustlers to feel more involved with what happens after they have 'reeled in' yet another 'must win' project? Well, there is a solution that is as pragmatic as it is simple: split the project sales bonus into three parts.

Part 1 – Half of the bonus is paid to the sales rep based on actualized gross turnover, as per usual. That amount does not change, because, after all, the salespeople and client managers bring home the much-needed bacon and we are grateful to them for doing so.

Part 2 – The next quarter of the bonus is paid to the sales rep only after the project is realized *to the satisfaction of the customer*. The satisfaction rate will be determined through an independent project evaluation, done both internally (as perceived by the project crew itself) and externally (as perceived by all other parties involved). The evaluation must score an 8 out of 10, or higher.

Part 3 – The last quarter of the bonus is only paid to the sales rep if the customer (the party to which the outcome of the project is ultimately sold and delivered to) is still satisfied with the provided product or service *after one year*, in comparison to what was promised. This will also be determined by independent external evaluation. Again, the score must be 8 out of 10 or higher.

Such a bonus construction will have a touching, tear-jerking effect. Because now, sales reps will suddenly become sincerely involved and concerned about the transfer process from sales to project. Suddenly, the 'best' project managers must be hired and the 'best' engineers must be drafted, they will say. And overnight, a fascinating interest grows into the course of the project, the transfer process to the end user and the way in which the aftercare and product

service are managed. It generates a ‘spontaneous’ interest into the entire supply chain, instead of just ‘raking in’ gross turnover. And that is achieved by simply chopping the carrot into three chunks and replacing two of them further down the stick.

And what do we do with the unpaid bonuses, when projects fail despite this new approach? We will invest that in education, professionalization, motivation and inspiration (but hopefully not hospitalization) of all the brave men and women who exert themselves on a daily basis to bring our frontally confronting projects across the finish line successfully. And we'll invest it in top leaders and super-conductors, so that our most risky change endeavors do not cause unnecessary harm. The bonus-knife will thusly cut both ways. Welcome to the wonderful world of perfect projects!

CHAPTER 2

DARE TO STOP WHEN IT GOES HAYWIRE

'Better to turn around halfway, then to squander the whole stretch' is the first thing we forget when we start running. Figure out for yourself how your project is doing and where you stand as a consequence. To call 'S.T.O.P.!' and start over again takes guts, but it will save loads of money.

Soldering until the cows come home

At 34 years, Mark is an ICT engineer in heart and soul. He is crazy about computers and completely in his element doing ICT projects that demand design, development and coding. If it were up to him, he would be programming stuff day and night in some isolated corner of the office. Because he can't stand the hassle involved with project management. It's all jibber-jabber and posturing to him, with managers and execs meddling in everything. It's all politics and it only slows things down.

Mark is part of a larger project team attached to the ICT service provider hired by the customer, a huge international company. Already for six months now, the team has been working on an outsourcing project, eventually taking

over all ICT systems and the operation management thereof. It will have organizational consequences for each business discipline within the company and for all countries in which they operate. It is a project with the highest specific density and if it fails, the entire business operation is at risk. These outsourcing contracts are worth hundreds of millions of euros and the project budget is huge: more than ten million euros.

One day, Mark gets a visit. For a while now the project is experiencing unrest and a lack of clarity and Chantal, a 26-year-old auditor with a punctual aptitude is asked to get to the truth of the actual status. In total there are about 150 people working on the project and already three million euros of the budget has been spent. Yet no one can show what has been delivered so far in any form of detail, let alone anyone having a consistent idea of the final outcome. Tensions are high and the air breaths an atmosphere of chaos and panic. Not that Mark has noticed any of it.

Today it's his turn to be interviewed by Chantal and she finds him in his private little corner, 'soldering print circuit boards'. (That's the metaphor I use for coding. So, for this story 'soldering a print circuit board' means 'writing code'). Chantal starts asking: 'So Mark, what are you doing right now?' 'I'm Soldering pcb's he replies. 'Yes, I can see that', she retorts. 'But, if I may ask, based on whát? And under whose authority?' He responds with someone's name. Chantal writes it down. He then starts to rummage through his cluttered desk and pulls out some scraps of paper. On the top of one of the pages she spots the title 'Functional design XYZ - Version 0.7 Concept'. There are scribbles all around the margins, which turns out to be Mark's handwriting. They are notes based on various phone calls he made during the initial stages of the project.

Chantal's jaw drops to the floor. Mark has been 'soldering print circuit boards' for five months now at 100 bucks an hour – based on a draft version of a functional design and a bunch of phone calls. There is no technical design to be found. After she digs a little deeper, he appears to have started his assignment commissioned by a colleague programmer (so not by his team leader) who, by the way, left the project already four months ago.

PROJECT SURVIVAL TIPS

Does this sound familiar? The project has turned into a disaster zone and you're up to your eyeballs in damage control. What must you do?

Stick to your guns

If you show resilience, you'll be criticized. It is not regarded as good 'team spirit'. At some point you'll be wrongly accused of being bureaucratic or recalcitrant. They'll call you a whistleblower, doing the dirty laundry outside the bubble. But the only thing you're factually doing is asking questions. You simply want to know what's up with the project, where you stand in all this. What's wrong with that? So, your concern is not how óthers feel about the status quo; you want to know what the heck is going on befóre you get cracking yourself. Moreover, you harbor a desire to contribute to the Greater Good. A stance like that requires tremendous willpower. So, stick to your guns until the situation is cleared up. Don't be tempted to 'show flexibility', 'be more pragmatic' or 'be less bureaucratic'. If you're not part of the solution, you're part of the problem.

At no time during all these months it occurred to Mark to ask questions or check anything. He's nicely tucked away in his private corner working with a bunch of engineering colleagues, he communicates almost exclusively via e-mail and occasionally, if there's no bailout option, he might attend a team meeting here and there. But when Chantal asks him if he doesn't think it's odd that the only bases for his soldering work – his programming efforts – is scribbled down on a scrap of paper with coffee stains on it, he replies: 'Well, dunno, that's just the way the cookie crumbles here, never ever seen it go down differently. Now, if you'll excuse me...'

The visible project versus the intangible product

Like Chantal's experiences in this project, this happened to me more than once in my role as auditor and crisis manager. After finishing the interviews with team members, team leaders and project leaders of a derailed, botched up project, I reel from one surprise to another. Nobody seems to have a clue whatsoever about the bigger scheme of things. In some cases, I could not find óne of the universal elements of a project in progress: no business case, no defined scope, no work packages, an incomplete functional design but no technical design, no risk management, no problem management and no clear demonstrable project hierarchy. But still, the project was running in full execution mode.

The various existing project meetings are oftentimes unstructured and almost all discussion and discontentment are communicated via email (or by complaining about it at the coffee machine). Everything is in motion based on almost nothing. It's flabbergasting and, frankly, fascinating as well. Along the way I have also observed lots of busy-busy-busyness and accumulated stress

with most of the project staff constantly working overtime. And during all that time nobody appears to stand up and say:

– Now wait just a minute here! What is the actual goal of this project?
– Hold on! Where are we headed?
– I'm confused. What is my role; what must I do?
– Help! Where can I go with questions and who decides?
– Red alert! How do we manage problems and issues?
– I don't get it. What are the criteria to which I am supposed to be successful?
– Listen up people! Shouldn't we start to think in solutions instead of complaining about our problems all the time?
– STOP! I don't understand what's going on here!

Brook's Law
Adding more manpower to an already delayed ICT project
will delay it even more.

This kind of chaos is symptomatic for project environments and organizations where objectives and deliverables are both invisible and intangible. For example, in ICT projects everything happens on the insides of computers and servers. You can't see or physically grasp the product, not even the half product. Think of it this way: if you're going to put a dormer window on your house and the hole that you sawed is bigger than the dormer window itself, everybody in the neighborhood will be able to see that your project has failed dramatically. Especially when you've tried to cover up your mistake with poly construction sheeting, waving chaotically in the wind for weeks, with that hired mini crane

in front of the house collecting cobwebs. But that's not the way it works in ICT projects. Many people can work undisturbed for a very long time on something illusive without delivering even óne single tangible object.

In the end, Mark's 'printer circuit boards' were completely useless. As a result of the continuously changing circumstances, the 'casing' in which they had to be 'plugged in' was no longer existent. All the work done was for naught. Mark and his team burned away a total of half a million euros without delivering any added value. Even worse: they could have found that out themselves already after a few weeks into the project, by asking a couple of inquisitive open questions. But they didn't and, equally idiotic and inexcusable, no one came and asked them how they were doing too. Except for Chantal but she was *ordered* to do so, because of all of the rumors of a botched up project in the making. And this was only one out of fifteen project teams. It must have delivered a fascinating audit report.

The strength and weakness of a project team

Derailing botched up projects inhabit something surreal. Problems and issues may continue for a long time before they start to become visible and tangible. Oftentimes it's the customer, the end user, who triggers it. For example, they don't receive enough status information or only overly optimistic feedback. As a result, they don't trust it and subsequently sound the alarm bell. Or project staff slowly but surely start to crash and burn due to stress and entrenched overtime. The level of complaining rises, the trust decreases and people get stuck in the mud.

This may take a long time – weeks, months – and all that time there's no

meaningful intervention, no fingers lifted, no interventions done. The steering committee, project leader, team leaders, staff members, team members – everybody's busy with their own duties, responsibilities and authority. There's plenty of nagging and whining going round and maybe the occasional maverick will take a stand with a futile attempt to translate frustration into action. But such a bold move will quickly be stopped in its tracks by the inertia of the collective, by project politics and by indecisiveness. Why is that? Why don't we stand up and face the music? Why is the train charging ahead full speed, with all the trimmings and fixings dragged along?

You can find the answer in the strength ánd the weakness of a group. Complex collaborations such as projects encompass people with all their natural behavioral attributes. Obviously, that combination of knowledge, experience and energy has an enormous potential. Leaders and followers, thinkers and doers, managers and employees; they all work together on the same assignment, towards a common goal. Together, they can do much more than if they worked individually; together they stand strong.

Shaw's Principle

Build a system that even a fool can use,
and only fools will want to use it.

Yet , as an individual we instinctively seek conformity within our small social groups. Projects are no different. We adapts, we look around and search for the greatest common denominator. Consequently, if the group is large enough and in the absence of natural leadership, a deadlock occurs where decisiveness is

required. There is plenty of good substantive knowledge going around, but nobody's getting the big picture. There is lack of initiative, problems and issues arise, no one steps in and the situation worsens. It quickly turns into a big pile of junk that everybody contributes to: together they stand weak.
Allow me to explain.

If you accidentally fall into the water and can't swim, you run the risk of drowning, no matter how many people stand around you. This social psychological phenomenon is known as the 'bystander effect'. The smaller the group of bystanders, the bigger the chance that someone will dive into the water and save you. The larger that group, the lesser the chance that someone intervenes. The tensions that arise within a temporary collaboration that is called a 'project', cause the same effect. People (both individual ánd group) will start to show abnormal behavior, precisely *because* there is that much additional pressure (compared to the normal business process) and especially *because* extreme performances have to be delivered under extreme circumstances.

Causes of non-intervention

Why don't we intervene when groups are in distress? Why do so many project panties turn in a twist without anybody stepping up to stop the downward spiral into a Fail Trail? As it turns out, projects are not immune to the bystander effect. Here's how:

– We notice that others are not intervening and therefore assume that intervention is not necessary.
– We expect someone else to intervene or someone else to take care of it.

– We think that others are more qualified to intervene.
– We're afraid we'll 'get hurt' when we do something.
– We feel anonymous within large groups. Offering help or taking initiative might lead to deferred criticism: 'You knew about it; why didn't you do móre?'
– We're afraid to embarrass ourselves.
– During a stress situation, making a well-thought-out decision is difficult.
– We don't interpret the situation as dangerous ('it is not all that bad' or 'it could have been a lot worse').
– Because we don't feel comfortable with the situation, we experience feelings of anxiety and prefer to ignore the problems and to forget them as fast as possible.
– We're afraid that new problems will arise from the intervention.

These considerations, which are utterly human in nature, contribute to the continuation of the undesirable situation. Only when a true leader steps up and acts – someone who yells 'STOP!' – the dynamic undergoes the desired change for the better. The group regains its insight, its overview, gets its bearings recalibrated and becomes motivated again. Nevertheless, this is not solely dependent of 'barricade leaders'. Leader or follower, we can all yell 'STOP!' and when we do that with merit, with facts and figures, we have a right ánd an obligation to do so. There is a personal leader hiding in all of us and we can all fight the chaos that surrounds us.

The S.T.O.P.-principle: Starting over is brave

Projects are executed in the spotlights of attention. Promises have been made and everyone knows about it. That creates a lot of pressure from the get go.

High-ranking individuals put their reputation at stake, depending on the success or failure of projects. Projects consume time, money and energy and affect the entire business supply chain. The game is on, all eyes are on the ball and the risk of failure is substantial. With that much exposure, nobody wants to lose face. But all this attention and tension doesn't negate the fact that two thirds of all projects fail. Money is wasted. Energy squandered. People suffer. In and of itself that is reason enough to introduce *The S.T.O.P.-principle*:

- **The S stands for Stop!**

Stopping is brave. Stopping is macho. Stopping shows guts. If all the traffic lights burn orange or (blood) red, then why hit the throttle? All the experience and evidence involving failing projects speak volume: it turns into shitty work, it costs a fortune and it causes human suffering. Are you reluctant to use the verb 'to stop'? Then use the term *'put on hold'*, '*pause*', '*reconsider*' or *'re-evaluate'*. But whatever you do, STOP before it's too late.

- **The T stands for Turn back!**

Is it unclear what needs to be done? Is everybody being vague about the project's deliverables? Are timelines conflicting? Is the design faulty? Are people gazing bewilderedly half of the time? Then go back to the drawing board. Look at the original starting points, mix them up with progressive insight and ask the right questions this time: what, why, who, when, how? Going back is not a sign of weakness. To admit your mistakes and learn from them it's a sign of high organizational maturity. It's worth it to take this bold position, because you want to break the vicious cycle of failure, to stop the Fail Trail.

- **The O stands for Overhaul!**

Going back to the drawing board oftentimes implies starting from scratch. Stick with the good stuff, tackle the bad stuff. This time around, the answers to open questions, poignantly asked and frontally confronting, must lead to a complete overhaul, a brand-new scheme of things, a new design, a new Master Plan. 'You can make it better than it was before. Better, stronger, faster!' (thank you *Six Million Dollar Man*, 1974 – 1978). This time around, lightning will nót strike twice at the same spot. Starting over is beautiful, it's cathartic, it provides relief and a boost of new energy.

- **The P stands for Perfectionize!**

Perfectionizing your project means that you are given a chance to reshape it. You repair and restore all defects, enabling you to more effectively iron out inevitable hurdles to come. The upgraded version of the project handbook will now, in contrary to the old one, be supported *by all* the involved parties. From now on you can provide the customer and end user with status and progress updates in a timely and orderly fashion, instead of leaving them lurching in the dark. This also implies that you're now willing to accept and acknowledge the extra cost of the delay, because you know from experience that it is only a fraction of the cost of a disastrous, prolonged, botched up project.

However, before you dare to yell S.T.O.P. you must come prepared. You need facts and figures to argue your case; the reasoning *why* it is better to backtrack now. You must be able to underpin and substantiate your message in a way that it is concrete, concise and *smack in the face*. But how do you go about that? Projects are often big, complex, pervasive, with lots of people and opinions floating around. How do you gain insight into the actual status of an ongoing project in a swift but effective manner?

The Status Totalus:
The group determines where the project stands

Imagine that you're around inside an ongoing, fully operational project, where everybody's running around being busy-busy-busy, like there is a sense of purpose, a sense of direction and a sense of urgency. But you don't like it, it feels icky. It all suggests some degree of accuracy that is simply not there. You want to figure it all out before it is too late. It must be done fast because the longer it lingers, the greater the damage. How do you pull that off?

My experience has taught me that it is always better not to do a status analyses in splendid isolation, but to involve as many people as possible, at a minimum your direct colleagues or your own team. In doing so, the conclusions will not only carry more weight, but will also create a broader base for acceptance. Thanks to the unique capacities of the human brain, we can assess, evaluate and signify a situation intuitively. As we have learned before when we discussed the *bystander effect*, most project team members are perfectly aware of the existing problems and issues, how and why they arise, but individually they seldomly act. So, the cunning way forward is to figure out the *implicit* individual assessments and to integrate them. With this now *explicit* collective assessment of truth and reality, you can, relatively quickly, determine the *Status Totalus* of the project and underpin your S.T.O.P. arguments.

The Traffic Light List

To quickly assess the objective overall status of a project in real time, I will provide you with a *Traffic Light List* that you can apply during short interviews with (a selection of) team members, team leaders, project leaders, steering

committee members and/or other stakeholders. This list includes questions covering the *Ten Universal Elements* (or *Ten Generic Aspects*) of a project that we will discuss below. You will stimulate your co-workers to apply both expertise ánd intuition to judge these elements. During the interviews it's crucial not to allow too much processing time: answers must come spontaneously. So, do not provide the Traffic Light List to the interviewees in advance. It is vital that you get your information on the spot, as the cooky crumbles and as the world turns.

Sweeney's Law

The length of a progress report is inversely proportional to the amount of progress.

Conduct face-to-face, one-on-one, one-hour interviews with your selection of project management, steering and staff. Along the way you will gain an exclusive insight into the circumstances and backgrounds of the problems and issues that are floating around within the project. An engaged and concerned individual wánts to share emotions, concerns and complaints. Being able to 'spit it out' creates a sense of community, a sense of relief and a sense of belonging. That is simply gold.

Below you will find the Ten Universal Elements / Ten Generic Aspects of a project. The first 40 minutes of your interview you start off with a simple question: 'What's up?', 'How are you doing?', or 'How are things going? Stimulate them to speak freely and take notes. Use the final 20 minutes to run

down the Traffic Light List. For each component ask: ‘What is your impression of the status of this element: green, orange or red?’
Please beware: only óne color may be chosen, so answers like 'greenish red' or ‘orange and a half’ are meaningless, aren’t funny and you shouldn’t allow it. Be friendly, yet strict and firm. When working down the elements of the list, keep a steady pace (two minutes per item) and don’t allow too much elaboration. They’ve had their chance in the first 40 minutes.

1. The foundation
Think about the goal, the added value of the project, the business case and the general structure of the project. How solid is this project mounted on its foundation? Can it resist a few earthquakes? Is it green, orange or red?

2. The steering
Think about the role of the steering committee and each of the steering group’s members. Are they capable? Is everyone in agreement about the project as a whole? Are they committed to the execution and are they willing to invest their time, money and energy in it? Is it green, orange or red?

3. The workload
This is the total amount of work that is required. Take into consideration the scope of the project, the sum of work packages, the financial budget, the setting of priorities and both serial and parallel activities. Is it green, orange or red?

4. The capacity
Are there enough people involved to do all the work? Do they have enough time? Think about travel time, the required quality and expertise, the

dedication, availability and continuity (having backups). Is it green, orange or red?

5. The throughput time

Don't confuse this with the amount of time *given* to complete the project. The throughput time is determined by the simple equation 'workload divided by capacity equals throughput time'. In other words: if a task takes 100 hours to complete and there are 20 dedicated uninterrupted hours per week available, it will take 100/20 = (at least) 5 weeks. And yes, it's that simple and there's only 168 hours in a work week (of which we sleep off about 56 hours).

Think about the planning, the serial and parallel activities, dependencies, holidays and the planning milestones, including the 'Go / No Go' moments. How realistic is the planning in its entirety? Is it green, orange or red?

6. The process

This concerns all the methodologies (the applicable processes and procedures) to allow the project staff (each individual) and their machines (the tools and technology) to operate successfully within the project. Think about the clarity, transparency and agility of the processes. Is proper balance achieved between bureaucracy and flexibility? Is it green, orange or red?

7. The communication

What is the quality level of the consultation structure and ways of communication, both formally and informally? Think about email, internet, intranet and social media, desk telephones, smartphones, pc's, laptops and tablets. Don't forget the quality of the various project meetings, the strength of

the chairmanship (discipline, time management, decisiveness). Is it green, orange or red?

8. The problems

Problems and issues are inevitable and inseparable from projects. But the actual number of existing problems combined with the existing problem-solving capacity of the project determine the level of chaos or structure within a project. Think about the risks (and risk mitigation), the dependencies, the impediments and what we implicitly consider to be a no go area, a discussion taboo: the *impossibilities*. Is it green, orange or red?

9. The transfer

When the project is finished, when the change is implemented and the final product or service is delivered, we're far from done. The outcome of the project must now be transferred to the customer, the business organization, the end users, who will have to work the new system. Think about the acceptation criteria, the applicable standards for operation, the receiving party itself and their involvement and receptivity. Are they ready for it; can they handle it? Is it green, orange or red?

10. The team spirit

Last but not least: what's up with the mood, the collaboration spirit, the mutual agreement, the involvement, the loyalty and the fun? In other words: is the cooperation laced with passion and is everybody willing and able to put the shoulders to the wheel? Or are there tensions, misunderstandings, quarrels, arguments, bickering, nagging and whining? Are people complaining all day long? Is it green, orange or red?

Once you have collected the answers from the Traffic Light List, you can easily calculate the results of your inquiry by applying a fixed number of points to each color, as follows:

– **Status Green is 10 points:** this element is under control, it is stable and predictable.
– **Status Orange is 5 points:** this element is at a tipping point and needs support and readjustment.
– **Status Red is 0 points:** this element is in a state of emergency and will not be successful without immediate intervention.

Choosing one color – and nothing in between – is not an easy task. It requires boldness and decisiveness. Some people paint everything green because they are hopelessly optimistic (or afraid to be honest). Others paint everything *blood red* because they are hopelessly pessimistic and heavy into nagging and whining. However, those extremes are filtered out by another strength of the human species: their numbers and diversity. You will find excessive optimists and pessimists in every group. Yet, the average, the mean doesn't lie. The ultimate result of this exercise will provide you with a more reliable Status Totalus than that off an individual staff member, steering group executive or uninformed outsider. It's strength flows from the numbers. So, the more interviews you do the better.

The Traffic Light Report

The scores associated with each color must now be converted into an overall project grade. Each one-hour interview delivers an individual 'traffic light report' with its final score. The results are clear and explicit: green, orange or

red. Nothing in between. Collect these results in a *Traffic Light Report* with status 'final'. Draft your report with the total outcome in the management summary, but also merge the data per project entity (group, team, department) to be able to compare that to the score of, for instance, the steering committee. This is an example of a report from an individual, imaginary team member:

Aspect	Color	Score
1 Foundation	Orange	5
2 Steering	Orange	5
3 Workload	Green	10
4 Capacity	Orange	5
5 Lead time	Orange	5
6 Process	Orange	5
7 Communication	Orange	5
8 Problems	Red	0
9 Transfer	Green	10
10 Team spirit	Green	10
Total	**60/10**	**6**

This team member rewards the project with a 6 out of 10. 'Pfew!' you might think, 'Passed by the skin of my teeth!', just like in school. Alas. As we have learned, when it comes to projects, we must apply stricter rules and regulations then we would in school. In the wondrous world of project management, you don't get away with a 6 or even a 7 out of 10. After all, when a project is in the execution phase, everything must be strictly under control, as we have learned exhaustively in Project Management School and as all the project management methodologies of the world dictate. With this enlightening principle in the back of our heads, the following criteria apply:

Score	*Qualification*
0 to 4,9	Disastrous to very poor
5 to 5,9	Poor
6 to 7,9	Tipping point or tilt zone
8 to 9,9	Good to very good
10	Outstanding: The Perfect Project

You see? Each score below 6 is poor at best. A normal project in execution mode must score at least an 8 out of 10, but the standard you need to apply is a 9 out of 10! In other words:

– A score between 0 and 6 is status (BLOOD) RED.
Slam on the brakes and yell S.T.O.P., because the project is in despair and will not be successful without immediate intervention.

– A score between 6 and 8 is status ORANGE.
Yell S.T.O.P., because the project is in the 'tilt zone' (read: at a tipping point) and needs immediate adjustment to ensure the proper direction towards a 9.

– A score between 8 and 10 is status GREEN.
The project is under control, stable and predictable. All is swell and dandy, everybody is happy and, you never know, this might just be a Perfect Project.

A project in the 'tilt zone' or at a tipping point can both be 'worrisome' and 'hopeful'. The situation is 'hopeful' when the trend of the score moves *up* from 6, towards a 7 or higher. However, the status is 'worrisome' when it moves down from 6, towards a 5 or lower. Of course, the trend only becomes apparent when you conduct two or more tests. Therefore, consider your first report as

the *baseline* (the so called *zero measurement*) and repeat the entire process after a few months. From the trend you will be able to determine whether the adopted measures are bearing fruit.

The frontal confrontation with information

The Status Totalus interviews will have given you the unique opportunity to 'exploit' people's desire to vent concerns (rad: to nag and whine about the status quo). You have listened carefully and noted all casual remarks, issues, problems, frustrations, complaints and laments that came up during the conversation. This represents a valuable source of information, a 'collection of solution hints' if you will, on how to get the project back into the green zone.

Now 'deduplicate' these potential problems and cluster them into problem areas. At this stage, actual solutions needn't be offered yet. The point is to quickly determine the project's overall traffic light color and the shared sentiments offer a hint, a foresight, sometimes even the beginning of a proper root cause analysis. In your *Status Totalus Report* you gather, organize and structure the opinions from individuals, teams, staff, management and stakeholders and as such you gain insight into the project's 'public opinion'.

THE FYRA FIASCO

A disastrous example of a botched up project occurred in the Netherlands in 2015, when the Dutch national railway service (the Nederlandse Spoorwegen or NS), ordered a new high speed bullet train called 'Fyra' from

an Italian manufacturer. The problems and issues with this project were complex, spanned more than a decade and involved several interest groups. The Dutch journalist, Sarah Venema, who reports for one of the major Dutch newspapers De Volkskrant, was invited by the manufacturer, AnsaldoBreda, to 'fetch the honest story'. At the end of the article the cat came out of the bag.

Marco Sacchi, an Italian engineer of AnsaldoBreda declared: 'The Dutch never said they wanted a train that is capable of travelling 250 kilometers per hour, even when there are heaps of snow...' There you go. This is a wonderful example of an 'implicit misunderstanding', the opposite of an 'explicit agreement'. The Dutch may not have specified it, but the Italians didn't ask about it either.

Apparently, nobody investigated the (sometimes extreme) weather conditions in which these kinds of high-speed trains must operate. Nobody lifted a finger, let alone raised a hand. Factually, there was agreement about an incomplete requirement list. When the shit hit the fan, and the trains literally began falling apart at the seams, both parties were at fault and so the mudslinging began. At the expense of hundreds of millions of euros.

During the interviewing process, your understanding of the actual status of the project in the real world will grow substantially. The more orange and red lights you see popping up, the graver the situation becomes. At some point, immediate intervention will be required. However, we can't take to the roofs and shout hell and damnation; we must always respect the chain of command.

Respecting the chain of command implies that, for example, if you are a team member collecting traffic light lists, you report the results to your team leader. If you are a team leader you report to the project leader. As project leader you report to the program manager or steering committee. As auditor you report to your client or principle. A project with an unexpected orange or (blood) red status is very sensitive material and will surely ruffle up some feathers. When the information leaks out prematurely, all hell might break loose. People in general, and project management execs in particular, don't like to be surprised. Equally worse would be for the report to 'get lost in the mail' or 'stuck in a drawer' somewhere, to detonate on a later date. Always stick to the rules of project politics: when the truth is known, it must be set free. And never éver go outside the chain of command.

Finally, the report has landed on the appropriate desk. Now it's up to the project's executive leadership to dó something with the reported information. Making the call to 'stop the press' always lies at a higher, if not *the* highest organizational level. It is now a matter of real time *recognition* and *acknowledgement* of the problem, which is the starting point of every solution based approach. And who knows, perhaps your project is bright green in color, all swell and dandy, and your apprehensions are unwarranted; let's not count that out. Hope springs eternal. Make sure you communicate that too, because that calls for celebration. But if it's orange, red or – big scare – *blood red*, then you have more than one problem on your hands.

On whistleblowers and scapegoats: Is your truth normal or abnormal?

When performing a Status Totalus analysis, you are factually determining the organizational maturity level of a project and, by taking the associated problems heads on, trying to raise that level. And you do that because your personal maturity level is already high and it has always told you the truth. You see the project failing with your own eyes and that worries you. You want to do something about it. With the right people, methods and machines in the right place, you want to turn this project into a success.

You share that concern with others that directly surround you and they share your concern in return. Together you feel you can truly see the bigger picture and by acting in a concrete, analytical, even scientific manner, you try to get that truth on the table. But I probably don't need to tell you that there is a big difference between being right, and proven to be right.

It's true, what you are doing with the Status Totalus is admirable and you're constantly thinking about that greater good: aiming for a perfect project. You want to get to the bottom of the problems and issues, identify the bottle necks and remove them. Who wouldn't want that? Well, yeah, perhaps in an ideal world, but the world of projects is far from ideal. What seems normal to you ('projects are solely meant to make the world a better place') might be abnormal to others ('projects are mainly meant to make *me* look better and get more powerful'). Your noble and aspiring actions might be a direct threat to someone else. Not everyone is necessarily involved or interested in that 'greater good'. Some are more concerned about serving their own interests above everybody else's.

For those kinds of 'high level project saboteurs in disguise', a Status Totalus, however honest and factual, is a direct threat and therefore a grave danger to the status quo. To them you are nothing but 'a pain-in-the-ass-whistleblower'. What they think is 'normal' will substantially differ from your 'normal'. To them, it is not 'normal' to be engaged in obtaining realistic project goals, adding value to the supply chain, safeguarding the return on investment and protecting the people involved from overload, stress and failure. It's a fact of (project ánd business) life that you will encounter individuals that are only concerned about themselves, their own egos, interests and bonuses. We are all equal, but some are more equal than others (thank you George Orwell).

PROJECT SURVIVAL TIPS

Does this sound familiar? The project has turned into a disaster zone and you're up to your eyeballs in damage control. What must you do?

Put your cards on the table

Don't beat around the bush, it's pointless. Every project has its own areas of political tension and some truths are extremely sensitive for good reasons. A project exposes the veins of an organization, it enlarges weak spots and not everyone deals with that kind of inconvenient exposure with a kind demeanor. So, be careful and subtle when exposing truth and reality. Put your cards on the table , but spoon-feed your story in small bite sizes if so required. Know when to tell what to whom at what time and in which manner. Spoon-feeding is not the same as ducking the issue. Sometimes

it's better to implement project management improvement suggestions in small steps, rather than to enforce a big bang approach. Use the strength of the group where possible (read: don't do it alone) and communicate a sense of resolve and community spirit. Remember: honesty is the best policy, but being dead honest at every turn isn't always the right way to go. Be sensitive to project politics, but stay away from playing political games.

Whistleblowers are generally not appreciated and often become easy scape goats. Projects oftentimes revolve around pressure, prestige and power. Projects are always in the spotlights and they are potential destroyers of images and careers. To avoid that, people will behave abnormally, engaging in disturbing and scary acts at times, which to themselves seem absolutely normal under the circumstances.

In the longer run, especially in higher echelons of a hierarchy, self-interest, greed and abuse of power can easily grab hold of someone, as if it were a new norm. If that 'new normal' spreads widely enough, people will start to conform to it and it will become 'new normal group behavior'. I call that *Gradual Collective Norm Depreciation*.

That's why a project audit such as a Status Totalus analysis must always be executed with the proper consent and clearance (at least from your own boss), and by involving as many people as possible. There's strength in numbers. But even then, your findings and conclusions, no matter how noble in nature, might be a direct threat to the powers that be. So, walk softly and carry an armored tank division (thank you Colonel Jessup in *A Few Good Man*). Perhaps it might even be wise to determine your own position in the project

first and make sure you have an escape plan ready. To that end, the *Anti-Botch-Up Quadrant* might come in handy.

The Anti-Botch-Up Quadrant: Where do you stand in your project?

Congratulations! You have just finished the Status Totalus of your project in its entirety. You have drafted a Traffic Light Report, as a direct result of your constant worries and exasperations about status and progress. Still, the whole thing can fly off in any direction. Your report is honest and straight forward, ready to go up the chain of command. All the identified problems and issues can now be addressed and translated into solutions. But wait! You still run the risk of being perceived as a whistle blower, easily turning into scapegoating. In that case, the report will be buried beyond recovery, the project botching will continue, with potentially detrimental consequences for you. If so, take a step back and evaluate the risks you are about to take. Because what is your réal stake in the project? Where do you stand? And how might you go about determining that?

By drawing up an *Anti-Botch-Up Quadrant*, you will gain insight into your own specific position within the project, in comparison with the Status Totalus. How important is it to you, that people adhere to the S.T.O.P. principle and that you are supported in that approach? In that sense you can compare the Anti-Botch-Up Quadrant to a Periodic Technical Inspection or PTI for your car. You assess whether your state of mind still passes the diagnostic, by doing a personal check-up of your position within the project.

What's the difference between the Anti-Botch-Up Quadrant and the Status Totalus? The Anti-Botch-Up Quadrant determines the individual's attitude and feelings towards the project. You ask yourself: 'Where do I stand as an *individual* within this project, what do I actually feel about it?' The Status Totalus on the other hand determines the actual status of the project in its entirety. You ask yourself: 'How does *the group* feel about the project?' In fact, you can see the Anti-Botch-Up Quadrant as a circle with you as individual in the middle of it.

The Status Totalus encompasses this circle, which includes the group and the project. In Chapter 5 we will get acquainted with the *Project Botch-up Test,* with which we will determine the successfulness of the *entire organization* surrounding the project. That circle will in its turn engulf the Status Totalus. The Anti-Botch-Up Quadrant depicts a three-dimensional image of the state your project is in and your personal position within. The three dimensions are the *significance* to you, the *actual status* and the *chances of improvement*.

First you determine the *significance* (to you) of each of the ten universal elements of a project by compiling a personal Top 10. Then you consider each element and assess the *actual status* and the *chances of improvement*, by grading them. The graphic Anti-Botch-Up Quadrant stipulates the status vertically and the chances of improvement horizontally. Each universal element is positioned in the appropriate quadrant, and by varying the importance in size, a 'three-dimensional' image is created of your own position with reference to the project as a whole. In one glance you can see what your options are. So, how does it work?

- **First dimension: The significance (to you)**

Assess the importance you feel to each of the ten universal project elements and create a Top 10. For example, place 'Team Spirit' as number 1, 'Structure' as number 2, 'Workload' as number 3 etcetera.

- **Second dimension: The current situation**

Grade each project element according to your current satisfaction, from 1 to 10. A score of 1 signifies that you are currently extremely unhappy about it and a score of 10 implies that you are completely satisfied with it. Beware: this is nót a Top 10! You can score each element individually with a number varying from 1 to 10, so you can apply equal values to multiple elements.

- **Third dimension: Chances of improvement**

Grade the chances of improvement for each project element from 1 to 10. Grade it a 1 if you think the amount of botching within this element is completely beyond repair, and grade it a 10 if you expect this element to be in perfect shape already. Again beware: this is not a Top 10! You can score each element individually with a number varying from 1 to 10, so you can apply equal values to multiple elements.

The grades from a set of coordinates within the Anti-Botch-Up Quadrant. Each coordinate is encircled: the largest circle specifies the most important generic project element, while the smallest circle indicates the least important element. The 'average position' of these coordinates mimics your *personal position* within this project. Together they create three dimensions of a playing field that is divided into four quadrants:

1. Upper right quadrant: Cherish

Just feel lucky when you're positioned here. Right now, the project is prospering (and you are too!) and in the course of time it might even improve. You feel good about it and you have no worries at all. Cherish, protect and enjoy this status. It's a great situation to be in and you've got every reason to be happy.

2. Lower right quadrant: Ride it out

When you're positioned within this quadrant, it might improve in the long run, but you are going to have to be patient. The project is currently struggling, but it's getting there, there are explicit improvements to be observed. Still, there's a lot of work to be done, but the intention to get better is present and action plans are being developed as we speak. That's hopeful. Assist with the repairs and hold your horses for a little while longer. In the end everything will work out just fine.

3. Upper left quadrant: Reconsider

If you're positioned within this quadrant it's time to think carefully about what you really want. For now, the project appears to be 'sort of under control', but that is just the calm before the storm. Once the shit hits the fan, the entire project will collapse, lock, stock, and barrel. Feeling bad about the status at this point is spot on! So, what are you going to do? Raise a finger and yell 'S.T.O.P.!' or pass the buck to somebody else?

4. Lower left quadrant: Change

If you're positioned within this quadrant it doesn't leave you many options other than to take immediate action to protect yourself. Your project is already one big mess and it's not going to get any better, any time soon. The train is running out of control and headed directly towards a derailment. Do you want

to be part of that? Or do you jump off before it's too late? Something's gotta give and if it's not the project, then it's going to be you. When you're in this quadrant, the writing is all over the wall and the time of ignorance has long passed: 'Run, Forrest, run!' (thank you Jenny in Forrest Gump).

TEST YOURSELF

Is your project rocking its foundations or is it standing strong? Is it time to cherish, ride out, reconsider, or change your position? Go to:

www.hetperfecteproject.nl

and determine where you stand within the Anti-Botch-Up Quadrant.

If you're not positioned comfortably in the upper right corner, cherishing your status quo, then you have one of three choices:

1. *Raise your finger, sound the alarm, do the Status Totalus and yell 'S.T.O.P.!'*
2. *Do nothing, remain seated, dig in and prepare to ride out the storm.*
3. *Get the hell out of there and run for the hills. Climb to higher grounds and find a more secure and more successful environment for yourself.*

Remember: this is kind of like a *Periodic Personal Project Diagnostic Test*. This test allows you to regularly check-up the maintenance status of your project(s) and to assess your feelings about them. Is it time for acute

maintenance or maybe for an entirely new project, somewhere else? The choice is completely yours!

CHAPTER 3

GET TO THE ROOT OF THE INEVITABLE PROBLEMS

Problems are inseparably and inevitably connected to projects and vice versa. Lack of agreement, commitment and investment are at the root of both the problem and the applied solution. To execute problem analysis effectively is a true art form and has no tolerance for emotions.

Project distinctiveness

Imagine living in a world that has no irregularities, no deviations, no problems. Everything runs smoothly and everything you do yourself is flawless. Every intention, every plan and every change endeavor is executed without problems or issues, from start to finish. Every day is a *Zero Mistakes Day*. No phone calls, e-mails or endless meetings with complaints about various anomalies – not a one! – and every progress report comes back with 'everything is under control', ‘entirely according to plan' and all targets completed successfully'. All is peachy, swell and dandy.

Now imagine how that would make you feel. It would probably drive you nuts! It's equally awful to live in a world where everything is perfect every time, all the time, as it is to be in one where everything falls apart everywhere, all the time. We *need* alteration and variety. Yes! We *need* change and we *need* challenges. Both can be found in the optimum between both extremes and without it, we lose our distinctiveness as a species: to be able to solve our problems and thrive on it.

As a collaborative species and being social group mammals, we have made considerable advancement due to our ability to take on, analyze and overcome problems. Conquering difficulties, especially within and between collaborating groups, provides us with a powerful sense of community. Joining forces strengthens our team spirit, it stimulates creativity and it creates a sense of purpose, direction and urgency. Problems, together with death and taxes, are certainties of life, and they are a part of what makes us tick us human beings. By solving problems and adding structure to an organization or project, humankind bravely fights King Chaos and delays the inevitable decay. A human collaboration (a team, department, business unit, company, multinational or a project or program) does not distinguish itself by achieving results through 'daily routine and habit', but much more by being problem-resistant and issue-proof.

In other words: we must structure our organizations and projects in such a way that our inevitable problems and issues are dealt with as though they are 'normal events' and 'routine activities', as though they are 'business as usual'. Nobody should be afraid of the 'Big Bold Bad Problem'.

It was inevitable: a logistics company with a good reputation as supplier of complex high-tech semi-finished manufacturing products ran into problems. A company truck keeled over on a roundabout. The cargo contained extremely expensive and delicate semi-finished products for the production process of a particular customer that was urgently waiting for them. This company in turn had to assemble and distribute its final product just-in-time to their customers.

None of the products survived the accident undamaged. (fortunately, the driver was fine; he escaped the one-sided accident without a scratch), so this meant condition Red Alert, full throttle. All related logistical processes were now dead in the water. The people involved were deeply stressed, because it was the first time a disaster of this magnitude occurred. Everyone feared that this incident could very well result in the termination of a long-term business relationship.

How did it turn out? Well, when push came to shove, it wasn't the logistics services as executed routinely over the years, that impressed the customer that much. That was considered 'normal'. No. it was the way they handled this catastrophe that created true loyalty. The problem was solved within 24 hours and all the components were redelivered as ordered. The customer was updated on an hourly basis and every promise was kept. Everyone worked to the max to get the supply chain running again. All fears of losing the customer relationship to be unfounded. In fact, they were highly satisfied with the swift, effective and efficient problem handling of this incident and are still talking about it to this day.

The Wondrous World of Projects is no different. Problems will arise, that's a

fact of life. We can leave that up to chance, chaos, bad luck and accidents, combined with our very nature as human beings. And we can leave it up to Murphy's Law. But in the end it is the way we deal with problems that determines the strength and distinctiveness of a collaborative in general and amplifies the success of a project in particular.

TOP TEN PROJECT FALLACIES

1. The faster you start a project , the sooner it will be finished.
2. The bigger and longer the project, the more complex.
3. The smaller and shorter the project, the lesser the risk.
4. The more expensive a project, the more important.
5. The busier a project, the better it is doing.
6. The more people you add to a project, the faster it goes.
7. The longer the project meeting lasts, the better the decisiveness.
8. The more successful the project, the greater the recognition and reward for the project team.
9. The more disastrous the project, the more responsibility the steering committee will feel.
10. The bigger the project mess and misery, the more value the steering group will attach to an evaluation report.

The secondary fire triangle:

In my foreword I have described the primary fire triangle: Man – Method – Machine. We tend to blame our *machines* (technology, computers, tools) and our *methods* (processes, procedures, protocols) when things go haywire. But it is *man* (mankind, us human beings, the human species), it is *we, the people* that mess things up. People are the mother of all fuck-ups, remember? Naturally, we cannot function without our machines and methodologies. We have evolved with their help; we function with their support. If you remove one of the three elements from the *primary fire triangle*, the collaborative energy will die out and the success dies with it. But if you want to understand hów problems arise in projects and hów they contribute to project failure, then you need to incorporate the *secondary fire triangle*:

Agreement - Commitment – Investment

While the primary fire triangle keeps the energy and the success of a collaboration going, the secondary fire triangle keeps its problem-solving capabilities going. Let's see how that works.

Agreement

You've probably seen it before: something goes wrong in your project; problems arise and the following reactions start flying off the shelfs:

'...I didn't know anything about that...'
'...nobody discussed that with me...'
'...I assumed that had already been done...'

'...weren't yóu supposed to do that?'
'...I never agreed to that in the first place...'
'...if you'd only asked me...'
'...when was that agreed and with whom?'

'When you *assume*, you make an *ass* out of *u* and *me'*, Oscar Wilde said. Don't ever presume; go check it out instead. If you want to reach explicit agreement about anything, you inevitably need others. But you also have a responsibility to check things out for yourself. You have a responsibility to ask open-ended questions, to call out problems and issues and to log risks befóre you start your project. Reaching explicit agreement requires extraordinary leadership; it's damn hard. But if you don't reach *explicit agreement*, you're still in the realm of *implicit misunderstanding*. Implicit misunderstandings fester and corrode the very foundation of a project, especially when they are combined with the absence of structured project consultation. They cause more problems than you realize.

Commitment

We often forget what commitment really entails. Being committed to something means that you don't put your tail between your legs at the first sign of setback. Being committed is equal to *irrevocable determination*. Being committed implies that you're show a willingness to act and have the ironclad will to pursue. Being committed has nothing to do with being obstinate or stubborn. Even a committed person knows the boundaries of irrevocability, when to yell S.T.O.P. and reverse or alter course, and when to proceed with caution.

Investment

You'll probably recognize this: with a lot of hardship and determination, a solution to a problem has been found and its execution plans have been approved by the steering group, but then the process grinds to a halt. Because, implementing solutions takes time, money and energy. Each solution constitutes an additional investment in time, money and energy, adding to the big pile. Solutions to problems are like 'mini projects'. The willingness to invest in the solution to a problem, is the capstone of the secondary fire triangle. The proof of the solution pudding is when the ones responsible for execution and implementation *actively* reserve time in their agendas, *actually* open their wallets and *explicitly* support the execution.

So, bring it on! We have now learned that problems are truly inevitable and we have come to understand what is required to push the attached solutions through the project supply chain horizontally and through the chain of command vertically. But how do these solutions come about?

The Problem Analysis Checklist: Getting to the root of the problem

We human beings have the inborn tendency to complain about problems too much for too long and subsequently lose our problem solving abilities. That's why I wrote *The Anti-Complain Book – First Aid Kit for Nagging and Whining*, which addresses this intriguing behavioral attribute. Prolonged complaining inhibits and frustrates the process of an effective and efficient problem analysis and it unnecessarily sustains the debate. In projects in particular, we tend to

confuse the *symptoms* (the consequences of the problem) with the *cause* (the root) of the problem and subsequently waste time, money and energy.

Murphy's Law's Fifth Inference

Left to themselves, things tend to go from bad to worse.

A proper problem analysis is a true artform. Long before I became a crisis manager I developed the *Problem Analysis Checklist* or PAC. The PAC is a short list of seven open-ended questions that enables you to systematically convert any kind of problem into workable solutions. It is based on the *root cause analysis*, commonly used in ICT environments to get to the root of hardware and software systems failure. For a broader application I have made the PAC generic. Now it is applicable to every conceivable problem area: organizational, technical, financial, commercial, logistical and behavioral.

The Problem Analysis Checklist has a specific energy management system: 80% of the effort must be spend on correctly answering the first three questions. In fact, answering the first question ('what is the problem?') takes already 50% of the effort. This implies that the analysis gets progressively easier after answering the first big one, with only 20% of the energy to spend on the last four questions. So, with the PAC, the viper's venom is not hidden in the tail, but in the head.

These are the seven questions of the PAC:

1. What is the problem?

Straight to the point: describe the problem as rational and professional as possible, in 20 words or less. Limit yourself to only one problem per checklist. Consider your analysis carefully: does this description most accurately cover the actual problem or are you merely listing symptoms? Ask yourself and your fellow analysts the following control question repeatedly: 'Ok, but *why* is that?' And then again. In doing so, you're constantly checking whether you're nearing the core of the problem instead of hovering around it. You are peeling a problem-onion, as it were.

2. What causes the problem?

Describe the actual root cause and not just the implications (the consequences or symptoms) of the problem. Avoid merely describing the problem in a different way than you did under question 1. It's perfectly fine to log multiple causes. Ask yourself what really lies at the base of this problem, what drives it, what compels it?

3. What are the consequences of the problem?

All the 'problems' that you have unmasked as mere symptoms in questions 1 and 2 will reappear here. Define the consequences to yourself, to your colleagues, to the process, procedures and protocols and to the team, the department or the entire organization. Describe the results of that discussion in concrete and measurable terms. How bad is it? How urgent is it? What is the cumulative effect of these consequences? How so, in what way, what do you mean exactly? Also ask yourself the supporting question: *what happens if the problem is nót solved?*

4. What needs to be done to solve the problem?

Describe the required actions as if it were a user instruction. Don't write down isolated nouns without a verb. You need to be able to assert what needs to be *done* with that noun. Apply logic: what needs to be done first, what is next. What needs to be delivered concretely? Use at least one verb/noun combination for every action (for example: 'draft a procedure', 'execute the emergency protocol', 'introduce new ways of working', 'put in place a backup system', 'purchase software XYZ', etcetera). Imagine each action in a practical and pragmatic sense: are you visualizing someone really doing it? Would yóu be able to do it?

→ **TIP:** Do you quickly want to reach original, creative outside the box comparative perspectives for a solution to your problems? Then use the collective brainpower of your team and start Think-Tanking. I will describe this revolutionary idea further on.

5. Who needs to do it?

Avoid vague action-owners and abstract institutions such as 'the management', 'the board of directors', 'the organization' or 'the department'. Name one or more living, breathing individuals of flesh and blood. Name just one preferably, 'by name and shame'. If you name more than one individual, the first name on the list is made 'action-owner' automatically ('one captain on a ship'). Be aware of the possibility, even if you are in the lead of the problem analysis, that your ówn name is listed there. And you may appoint someone as action owner, even someone who is not present at the analysis itself; the reallocation of tasks – and the debate about it – can always be done in a later stage.

ABOUT CORRELATION AND CAUSATION

I once attended a grand seminar on project management, where different gurus climbed the stage to talk about project methods and techniques before a group of over a hundred project managers of various stature. One project methodology salesman talked passionately about the significant rise in the number of certified project managers. With graphs and charts, he dazzled the audience with spectacular numbers and steep growth curves. 'More and more project managers are now fully embraced in the art of project management', he proudly proclaimed.

However, just before he came to that conclusion, he had explained that over the last few decades, as meta studies showed, the number of actual successful projects, about one-third in all, had remained frighteningly constant, measured against the original goals in terms of money, time and quality. Apparently, two thirds of all projects were failing miserably, everywhere and in all trades and industries. Those graphs showed a kind of flatline, hence the need for this specific project management methodology, of course, and he was eager to sell it. I was seated in the back of the room and I calmly raised my hand, all five fingers spread wide, to draw his attention. 'Excuse me', I said. 'Could you please be so kind as to overlay those two graphs for me, please?' And so, the truth was told.

Do you see? Apparently, there is no causal relationship between the overall increase in certified project managers and the overall success rate of

projects! No matter how many educated project management experts we produce; the flatline remains a flatline. This is particularly interesting, because after thousands of years of project management since the erection of the great pyramids in Egypt, you would expect our projects to be perfect by now.

With the ever-growing computing power of our servers, the unlimited storing capacity of our data centers, our smart phones, laptops, tablets and pc's and our nifty project management processes, procedures and protocols, you would expect our change endeavors to approach the limit of '100% project success rate all the time, everywhere'. Clearly that is not the case. The right open-ended question to ask, in fact, the one we're trying to answer in this very book, is: why is that?

6. When must it be ready?

Put yourself in the shoes of the 'action-owner' and define the actions in realistic terms. Attach a sensible date to it. 'Yesterday', 'right away' or 'as soon as possible' are not useful in a practical sense and they don't make the problem any more urgent or important (neither does 'the day before yesterday'). Saying 'today' or 'tomorrow' is not useful either, if it's factually unrealistic or unattainable (just as is 'the day after tomorrow' is). It's counterproductive. Now's the time to start thinking in professional and highly mature project management terms: take the opportunity to draft a first 'mini-planning schedule' to this solution, one that includes phases, due dates and deadlines for delivery. The execution of a solution is a mini-project in and of itself.

7. What needs to be done to prevent it from happening again?
That is the power of prevention! When answering this open-ended question, it's perfectly fine to use certain elements from your answers to question 4 ('what needs to be done to solve the problem?'). Just remember, there's two ways to solve a conundrum. Either one-off ('this is a unique problem that will most probably not happen again') or structurally ('we observe a systemic or generic issue that needs to be addressed accordingly'). Solving a problem one-off is great when you are dealing with mere incidents. However, with structural problems, the one-off solution will draw you down to fighting symptoms again. So, think in terms of process, procedure and protocol: what needs to be changed in the collaboration to prevent it from ever happening again?

The function of rubber stamp issues

The Problem Analysis Checklist or PAC is divided in three sections: the first three questions deliver the *problem definition* (section 1), the next three define the *action list* (section 2) and the last question pertains to *prevention* (section 3). Applying the PAC is not an option: from start to finish, all participants in the project must be made familiar with it. In my view it should be considered to be a mandatory tool for all types of problem solving.

From a bottom-up perspective, the PAC functions as a lever to force 'rubber stamp issues' to higher levels of decision making as they move up the chain of command. A rubber stamp issue is a document that contains one single problem, which is analyzed in such a way that anyone can see in one glance – because it is on one single piece of paper – what's going on and what needs to be done. The specific problem can therefore be 'stamped off', that is to say: the appropriate decision makers are able to make a well-informed decision, based

on the actual information available, produced in good cooperation and under explicit collective agreement. In short: it's a sign of high maturity.

Weinberg's Inference

An expert is someone who avoids small errors
while heading for the great gaffe.

A rubber stamp issue prevents detailed substantive discussion on higher levels of management. After all, the decision makers don't have to go through the detailed exchange of views and painstaking analysis of the problem over and over again. They don't have to crunch the numbers; that work is already done. The only thing they need to do is decide on the way forward. Applying the PAC this will ensure that the number of problems pushed up the chain of command get weeded out, and each level in the hierarchy is appropriated the number and kind of problems it 'deserves'.

Ultimately, the remaining *major issues* are reserved for the highest level of management, the steering committee or the executive board, but they come in the same shape and size as the *minor issues* on the work floor. Every PAC looks the same and is handled in the same way. Applied in practice, it will reduce the flow of nagging and whining about problems, especially via email, at least by half. It will unmask the notoriously heavy complainers, it will reduce noise and it forces a collaboration to become solution oriented, rather than prone to problems.

However, please be aware that the Problem Analysis Checklist is only a *method* in its own merit. It's a process, a way to effectively and transparently map out and solve problems. You might even use a *machine* (smartphone apps, email, internet, intranet, the cloud) to record and communicate about it effectively. But in the end, its success lives or dies with the actual application of it by *man*, by people of flesh and blood.

You can't just, out of the blue, send a quick and dirty 'email to all' on, say, a Friday afternoon at 16:30 hours, with the announcement that 'everyone' is now 'obligated to use the PAC, starting Monday morning at 09:00 hours and that'll be the end of all that nagging and whining about problems all the time'. A highly mature process such as implementing a PAC process requires agreement, commitment and investment. It demands leadership. In other words: within the Problem Analysis Checklist, man, method and machine on the one hand and leadership, maturity and resilience on the other hand merge together as one.

Think-Tanking with Brainpower

The 4th question of the Problem Analysis Checklist examines what needs to be done to solve the problem. Of course, as the author of your own PAC, you could come up with your own answer. That's a good start. However, oftentimes it is better to utilize the collective brainpower of a group. As we have seen in the Project Match Test, with each person added to a group, the number of potential conflicts doesn't grow linearly but exponentially (yes, people are truly the mother of all fuckups) and so does the number of attached solutions. There's no one way of solving problems and we should always ask 'what else can it be?' (when we analyze the root cause) and 'what else can we do?' (when we come

up with potential solutions). With each additional person we add an extra set of brains to the mix, increasing the tremendous processing potential of the human brain. With all these minds running in parallel, especially when we think outside the box, our collective mind acts as a supercomputer.

Supercomputers

Supercomputers, simply put, operate by the parallel interfacing of large numbers of individual pc's or CPU's, which are called *nodes*. The computing power of each node is limited, but together they are invincible. When I was writing the original Dutch version of this book in 2013, the USA-based *Titan* was the fastest supercomputer in the world , executing at about 20 *quadrillion* operations per second. That's one thousand times a billion floating point operations per second, or 20 petaflops. In 2020, that position was taken over by the Japanese supercomputer *Fukagu*, apparently named after Mount Fuji, which does 442 petaflops, or about 22 times as fast as the Titan. When this English translation was published in 2024, the USA based *Frontier* topped the list at over 1,200 petaflops, almost three times as fast as the *Fukagu* and already sixty times (!) as fast as the *Titan* in 2013. Time flies when you're in an exponential computing capacity curve. By the time you read this, I'm sure the *Frontier* supercomputer is already outclassed again.

Over 1,200 petaflops is some serious computing power for sure, but we humans aren't so bad either. Your brain has an estimated 100 billion interconnected nerve cells, which are the information and signal processors of the human body. Nerve cells have a specific feature: they can be stimulated to transmit and receive signals without losing signal strength. The brain contains circuits of nerve cells that regulate numerous bodily functions as well as our

cognitive capabilities. What would happen if we could 'parallel interface' these individual, human cognitive 'nodes' and their capabilities? I call that *Think-Tanking with Brainpower*.

Think-Tanking with Brainpower allows you to accelerate the problem-solving process considerably. Are you bothered with problems that are both complicated ánd persistent? Are you looking for a quick fix, because you're running out of time? Use humans as a supercomputer and 'parallel interface' their brains. Here's how you do it.

Subgroups and parallel processing

To solve any kind of problem quickly and creatively, you start by dividing a group of people into smaller subgroups of a minimum of three and a maximum of ten, depending on the total size of the group. You can do that by simply counting them up, depending on the desired number of subgroups. For example, you can divide a group of 60 people into 10 groups of 6 (or 12 groups of 5) by repeatedly counting to 6 (or 5), etcetera. Each subgroup is now presented with one problem ('one challenge for all') and you kindly request to come up with a minimum of three (but you stimulate them to come up with more) original, creative and outside-the-box solutions, suggestions or propositions to that problem. Limit the exercise to 15 minutes tops.

Stimulate the parallel processing subgroups to think outside-the-box, to be unconventional, original and more importantly, to be *creative*. After calling out the last five minutes, ask the chairman of each subgroup (or the entire group if they prefer) to prepare and present their findings to the entire assembly in 2 minutes or less, using a simple flip-over. You'll be amazed by the

sheer variety, creativity and speed in which solutions are presented under collective creative pressure.

Think-Tanking with Brainpower versus Brainstorming

Think-Tanking is not the same as a common brainstorm session. Of course, brainstorming is part of the process – for example, you can do a normal brainstorm session first to create an overview of problem areas and the specific problems therein – but Think-Tanking with Brainpower has two unique properties: the total number of participants can be much larger without losing time and the whole exercise is done under creative pressure.

The effectiveness of Think-Tanking

Imagine you've got a group of 60 people, divided into 10 groups of 6. Think-Tanking with Brainpower will provide you with 30 to 50 original, creative, outside-the-box solutions within 35 minutes: 10 minutes to explain the process and assemble the subgroups, 15 minutes of parallel processing and 10 minutes of presenting the solutions. But if you do the exercise with, say, a group of 120 people, divided into 15 subgroups of 8, the total time spent will still be only 55 minutes: 10 minutes to explain the exercise and form groups, 15 minutes of parallel processing and 30 minutes of presenting. That's less than an hour of time spent with a relatively large group of people, providing you with 50 to 80 creative solutions to your problem.

I've been doing these exercises for years now and the average number of ideas produced is about one per minute. Even when you have larger groups, let's say up to a hundred people or more, the parallel processing principle guarantees that it will never take more than an hour, tops. The more sub-groups, the more ideas will be produced, but the elapsed time remains roughly the same. It's brilliant! After the presentations are done, you can easily weed out the duplicates and thicken the list to a Top-10 of most feasible solutions. Besides that, you'll be left with a reservoir of alternative ideas and solutions to be used whenever and wherever appropriate. Not bad for an hour's work.

As I've seen happen many times in organizations of all shapes and sizes, the process is fascinating. Once during a workshop, I witnessed a department manager present a serious strategic/tactical problem that he had been struggling with for years. Within one hour, I was able to have his own operations team present him with multiple original, creative and outside-the-box solutions to that problem. I can still see the surprised look on his face after he withdrew his jaw from the ground. 'Thanks', he said. 'Don't thank me,' I replied, 'Thank your team!'

As a solution generator, Think-Tanking with Brainpower is very productive, but it is not as miraculous as you would think. All these original, creative and outside-the-box ideas, suggestions and propositions aren't created on the spot; they were already there, floating around in the heads of people. But creative solutions for complex problems are seldomly found on the work floor, because we are so very *busy-busy-busy* all the time. It takes Think-Tanking with

Brainpower to step out of the daily routine for just an hour, pick the teams collective brain and apply the solutions the very next day. Who wouldn't want thát?

Practical tips for Think-Tanking

When put under creative pressure, properly stimulated by inspiring leadership, people wánt to cooperate and people wánt to achieve, perform and deliver. So, make sure that you use a stopwatch. Fifteen minutes is fifteen minutes and not a minute more. You are the 'time judge' and every five minutes you call out the time left. At the final two minutes or so you announce: 'Wrap it up, people, two minutes left! Don't forget to appoint someone to present your ideas to the group!'

Be aware: the longer it takes the lesser the result. The creative pressure principle is clearly the success factor here. When the 15 minutes are over, 'chase' everyone back into the plenary meeting room and immediately start-up the two-minute presentations. And don't forget to log the number of ideas and the presentation time per subgroup; you'll be amazed by it.

These (proposed) solutions can now be used to answer the last three questions of the Problem Analysis Checklist: who needs to do it, when does it have to be ready and what do we do next time to prevent it from happening again? Of course, these questions do not need to be answered

during the Think-Tanking with Brainpower exercise. You can take care of that in a later stage.

The most important take away from Think-Tanking with Brainpower is that the solutions are now on the table for everyone to see. And yes, it's that simple and it works like a champ. Just give it a try. Why struggle with problems for weeks, months or even years, if it only takes an hour or so to jointly transfer all project problems and issues into original, creative and outside-the-box solutions? Stop brooding and fretting over it and start Think-Tanking with Brainpower today!

CHAPTER 4

ACT AS AN ENTREPENEUR

Many companies struggle with the obscured difference between a regular business process and a project. Projects are confrontational, expensive and can expose weakness and incompetence. By determining just how botched up your projects really are you can restore true entrepreneurship.

When managers act weird, give them weird back

Years ago, I was hired as a crisis manager to put a derailed project back on track. It involved a large-scale project within an international company, aimed at re-organizing and restructuring tens of thousands of workplaces in terms of both hardware and software. The project had gone completely sour and worn out two project managers already. One of them was sent home with a severe burn-out. The project had become politically sensitive, resulting in an emergency meeting between the management teams and board of directors of both customer and supplier. All the deadlines were in grave danger ('Is there any other kind?' – thanks again Colonel Jessup in A Few Good Man) and the difference between perfect promises and bitter reality grew bigger every day. The project was in dire straits for sure.

I had an intake meeting with three high level managers on the supply side:

the client manager, the sales manager and the account executive. All three were jumpy, frustrated and anxious; the mess they had gotten in was clearly taken its toll. Their bonuses were in jeopardy. You could smell the stress, embarrassment and the threat of losing face in the room. Naturally, they had little time for me, being so busy fighting systems and all, and they were continuously fiddling with their smartphones and laptops.

I came prepared, did my due diligence and drafted a concept contract that stipulated the usual terms and conditions for such a precarious project in general and the role of me as crisis manager in particular. For example, one of the conditions stipulated that I could not be held accountable for the current status of the project, but that I would investigate, interview and analyze the situation and urgently draft a proposal for improvements.

The client manager started off with a big sigh and described the current situation. They needed someone – and I quote – '...to finally just get the job done, just get it over with, just be dóne with it already'. The other two gentlemen nodded their heads in agreement. I cordially thanked him, said that I understood what was expected of me, pointed their attention to the contract and symbolically slid it across the table in the direction of the trio.

That provoked, how shall I put it, an 'interesting' response by the account executive. Without taking even a glance at the document, he rudely shoved the document back in my direction and shouted angrily that '...it is high time to stop jerking around and cut the crap!' Apparently, as he so stipulated, they didn't need another contract; they needed 'someone who finally just gets the job done, without ifs or buts. Just get it done, just gó already!' The other two

gents couldn't agree more. Apparently 'just' was an important word here. Anyway, this clearly called for an intervention.

Suddenly I began to look around and checked all my pockets. I said, 'Well, I'll be damned…' I stood up and continued checking my pockets frantically. I then walked over to the coatrack and checked the pockets of my overcoat. 'What are you doing? What's wrong?' They stared at me with baffled faces. I mumbled back, 'I just don't understand this…' I mumbled on and exited the room. There I waited for half a minute or so and then went back inside, still looking flabbergasted. I stood right in front of the trio and looked them straight in the eye, one by one, as though I was in panic. 'Gentlemen, this is unbelievable, just unbelievable. Yesterday I still had it, but today I seem to have lost it. It's a true mystery indeed…' Now they yelled almost in unison: 'What the heck do you mean? Whát have you lost…?!'

I paused for a moment and then said: 'My WAND, of course, my lords! You want me to just get the job done, just do it, just get it over and done with. Well, if that's the case then I really need my magic wand. So that I can do PING! All the employees are motivated again'. (I swung my virtual wand in the air like a skilled conductor). 'And PING! All the planning is back on track again. And PING! We are on target and on budget again. And PING! The customer is happy again. But you see, I can't find my wand, so now, I do fear, gentlemen, that we're júst going to have to handle this crisis like a regular one, júst the right way, júst to get it done properly'. And then I sat down again and gently slid the contract back over to their side of the table.

On the difference between a process and a project

What's going on here? How is it possible that highly educated professionals, experienced business managers, seasoned directors, big shot CEOs, CIOs and COOs, who usually guide their companies effortlessly through the consecutive fiscal years, are completely thrown out of balance by something silly like a project? What makes them say and do things that they would not even consider doing under normal circumstances? In other words: why isn't a project run like a professional undertaking, like a highly mature organization?

TOP TEN PROJECT MANAGEMENT METAPHORS

What it's called	What it actually is
Eager	Greedy
Flexible	Chaotic
Politically strong	Indecisive
Modest	Weak
Indispensable	Incompetent
Calm and experienced	Indifferent
Broad-based	Aimless
Pragmatic	Unstructured
Enthusiastic	Headless chicken
Keeping options open	Wavering aimlessly

In order to run a regular business operation in such a way that it generates sufficient turnover and subsequent profit, we must run processes continuously,

the entire fiscal year long. At the end of that year, we can decide whether to 'transfer matters across the annual limits'. We can write off costs now or in a later stage. We can do a little bit of creative bookkeeping here (hide costs) and a little boating there (transfer costs), to keep everything going. You know, be flexible, bend the rules a little bit, but not break them. Apart from the definition of a 'fiscal period' (a month, quarter, semi-year, a year) the process has no beginning or end. For as long as the company exists, the process exists.

So, apart from all the countless definitions of a project that exist, what is the fundamental characteristic of a project in all its simplicity and clarity? When we state that 'you can take a project out of the business process, but you can't take the business process out of a project', what do we mean exactly? What truly differentiates a project from a business process? The primary distinction is found within its limitation, its ironclad boundaries. A project has a time-constrained, extremely specifically marked, highlighted and flagged beginning and end. Where a business process is perking and simmering its way from fiscal period to fiscal period, with endless possibilities to accelerate or slow down, to move stuff around or to manage it a bit differently, the basic definition of a project is *re-lent-less*.

Projects have a clearly defined start and finish, for everyone to see and within these boundaries everything needs to get done, in specific chunks, in a specific order and with specific costs. And everybody involved knóws it too, everyone is able to see. Agreements and promises are made, ego's put on the line, and heaps of resources are dedicated to the cause. And when it's finally done, we want to see a clear, tangible end-product and we expect everything to be noticeably improved as well.

PROJECT SURVIVAL TIPS

Does this sound familiar? The project has turned into a disaster zone and you're up to your eyeballs in damage control. What must you do?

Fight for your team

Whatever you do, you're still part of a team. The entire project is a team and the part of the project that you have been assigned to is a team. As an individual you are, by definition, weaker than the collective. It doesn't matter how strong a leader you are, on your own you will lose the battle. So, fight for your team, and make sure you are all on the same page. Are there any problems? Solve them together and present the solution as a group: your strength is in your numbers. It's far more difficult for a manager to say 'no' to a dedicated group than to an individual. And it feels great to bring forward a highly mature, collectively achieved solution to a problem. Accomplishment. Stick to your guns, even though the presented solution might be at odds with the perceived status quo. As long as you are going for the bigger picture, the Greater Good, you will stand on the right side of history.

That precise limitation, those hard boundaries (whether they are realistic or not) and the field of tension it creates for men, method and machine explains why projects invoke such peculiar human behavior. Projects drive humans to

behavioral extremes (both good and bad), precisely *because* projects deviate so fundamentally from the business routine of the day.

Projects are (mini) companies that run their life cycle from establishment to dissolution in far less time than we're used to. And they have the potential to be financially – and personally – much more damaging than we realize. In projects, leaders and managers invest their hearts and souls, as well as their careers and ego's, especially in the initial stages of the project when they can act self-assured, even cocky. But it can cost them dearly. To avoid that, they will twist and turn, manipulate and mangle, fight, freeze or flee in fascinating ways.

After years of hard work, Judith is elevated to international program manager at her company, an ICT service provider. At the age of 28, she is one of the youngest of her department to reach that high level of competence. Judith really enjoys working the tension field of multiple projects simultaneously, in different countries and on various continents with fascinating people from different cultures. Never a dull moment indeed. Occasionally though, she is truly baffled about what's thrown in her path.

This time, Judith is hired by a company to run an international, large scale ICT program to implement a new procurement business process, combined with the matching software package. This company – actually, you might better call it a conglomerate – is reserving an enormous budget for the project running into the hundreds of millions of euros. The program is extensive and complex, with numerous sub-program managers running huge project organizations in various countries on three different continents. It is centrally

managed and controlled from the Netherlands by Robert, the program director on the client side, who is 55. Judith reports to Robert directly.

As program director, Robert is responsible for all the comings and goings of everything and everyone involved, but he also actively interferes everything and everyone involved, varying from high level global conference calls with top business managers to low level detailed technical discussions with engineers about specific lines of code in the ICT purchasing software. Robert is a technician in heart and soul and an experienced business manager, but he is also strongminded to the point of being rude, lacking humor and empathy. Such an absurdly huge ICT program creates enormous tensions and stress. The software package is constantly tinkered and tampered with and each country wants to do it differently. Robert submits to everyone's wishes and therefor the word 'standard' has become meaningless. 'We like to go by one standard; that's why we have all of them' is the running gag. Judith has her work cut out for her.

One day while she and a group of colleagues are going over the planning, Robert suddenly storms into the room. In a fit of sheer madness, his face red hot and with arms gesturing wildly, he starts ranting, raving and cursing. His is spewing his rage at everyone in the room, not necessarily towards Judith alone. But he is só close to her, almost in her face, that she takes the full grunt of it. What a tirade; it is completely bizarre. She feels the urge to grab an umbrella. At some point he literally stamps his feet. Judith must restrain herself from laughing, trying separately to keep a straight face.

It is completely unclear what has instigated Robert's anger and frustration. Apparently, all over sudden everything has gone wrong everywhere – which

was to be expected at some point – and Robert is just looking for a scapegoat. Finally, at the end of his ranting and raving, he stares furiously at Judith, hands clutched to his side. But she doesn't budge. She gives him a cool glance and in a calm voice she says, 'I'm a bit busy right now, so I'm going to talk to you about this in a little while.' He huffs and puffs a little bit more, storms out of the room straight into his own office, slamming the door so violently that the windows bulge. Now everyone can hear him, straight through the walls, raging on his poor secretary. Robert on steroids. Judith sighs in frustration and continues her meeting. The others smile; at this point everybody's gotten used to his irrational and idiotic behavior.

Robert is simply incapable of managing such a comprehensive, complex change program within the required timespan. But he is not the only one under pressure; everything and everyone around him is too. Running such a complex change endeavor provides little leeway for 'improvisation'. Robert is getting hit left and right with multiple problems and there is no letting up. In his comfort zone as business manager and technician he might be rational and sharp, but now he's both cornered ánd in a tight spot. That causes heaps of anxiety and stress. It will inevitably lead to erratic behavior.

Jacob's Law

To err is human – blaming someone else is even more human.

Of course, the fact of the matter is that the blame is on himself. Time and time again, he allows procedural and technical exceptions to those who are the most loud in demanding it and the most vigorous in complaining about it. But he

completely fails to recognize the causal relationship between his behavior and the very crisis he is in. In fact, he genuinely believes that the enormous responsibility, the pressure and the stress he's under *justify* his rude behavior. He is *perfectly allowed* to behave this way, he feels, because it must be obvious for everyone what a seemingly impossible job he's got to do. Isn't it crystal clear then, that the only way to deal with it is to bully, shout and holler?

Between organizational maturity and entrepreneurship

A project is like a 'mini-business'. As a result of inevitable time pressure, a project demands high levels of organizational maturity of both the people in the business organization and those who execute the project. Before initiating a project, it is prudent to chart the level of organizational maturity of the organization, the projects therein and the groups and individuals involved. To do that, we first need to dive in the concept of organizational maturity.

In projects, mature behavior is directly related to *professionalism*. With 'professional' I am referring to true craftsmanship, being 'skilled in a profession or trade' or 'having the ability to deliver high-quality work'. Terms such as skills, expertise, proficiency, mastery and control are applicable here. In equal but opposite terms, immaturity is correlated with *amateurism*. An amateur is a hobbyist, someone who practices something as a pastime. And sure, some amateurs might be able professionals without making a living out of it, hence the saying 'better an able amateur than a bad professional'. But when I refer to amateurism in projects, I don't mince words: project amateurs are guilty of incompetence, stupidity, shortsightedness, ignorance, clumsiness,

a lot of fumbling, fiddling, messing around and botching it up. They do shoddy work and deliver a pile of rubbish on top of it.

The definition of *organizational maturity,* usually referred to withoin the context of a 'maturity model', is derived from the *Capability Maturity Model* (CMM), originally developed to determine the maturity level of the process of software development. But I like to apply it more broadly, as a *generic organizational maturity model* for any kind of collaboration. Commonly, there are five maturity levels (1 through 5), but in the following overview I have taken the liberty to add one extra level at the bottom: level 0.

- **Level 0 - absent/not applicable ('Dystopia')**

The organization is totally unaware of any problem. The managers and employees, blessed with ignorance, wouldn't know what to do differently even if reality hit them straight in the face. Nothing matters. The entire company is in a permanent state of chaos, and that chaos has become the standard. Everyone is running around like headless chickens, jerking around as if it were common practice and, let's be honest, that's what it is to them. In work environments like these, man, method, and machine suffer intensely and leadership, maturity and resilience are meaningless.

- **Level 1 - initial/disorganized**

Everything is ad hoc and chaotic. Problems are not addressed until they pop up, which is a typical reactive posture. Most of the day-to-day business relies entirely on the maverick types, the 'local heroes' that perform their individual miracles, with everybody hoping they will never collide with a large tree, since there is nobody to replace them. Stable processes are rare; nothing is truly coordinated. It's useless to introduce new technologies or methodologies here.

There is no integrated training program (education is *ad hoc*) and if information is collected and analyzed, it's done in a random, one-off and unstructured fashion.

- **Level 2 - repeatable/intuitive**

Knowledge that is acquired in earlier stages is utilized, albeit sporadic. Success still depends on the 'local heroes', but decisions are already partially based on experience and sometimes even a replacement or backup is appointed. The level of chaos is reduced and people feel better in the workplace. In general, there's more insight, oversight and overview. However, information is not commonly shared with others for learning purposes. Training and education take place, but not in a structural manner, there are no tailored educational programs and a broader perspective or some view of the bigger picture or 'greater good' is still absent.

- **Level 3 - defined/structured**

The most important business processes are standardized. The level of dependency on 'local heroes' is drastically reduced, replacements and backups are appointed in a more structural way. In other words: real live human beings instead of systems are deployed as backups. Collaboration has been dramatically improved and training programs are being developed and intertwined with roles, responsibilities and authority. The business processes and the management thereof have become significantly more integrated and more widely connected with the bigger picture. Procedures are standardized, but they still lack corrective ability.

- **Level 4 - managed/controlled**

The quality of business processes is constantly monitored and measured to allow for structural modification. There is a strong sense of teamwork and team play across the board. Sub-processes and -procedures are partially automated and are well understood, corrected and continuously improved on all levels. Integrated business information is used for a qualitative and quantitative understanding of the business processes within the supply chain. Training and education policies are standardized and adapted to the organization and its overarching strategy.

- **Level 5 - optimized/integrated ('Utopia')**

The organization is 'best of its class', adaptive, self-cleansing, self-correcting and self-improving. Everything runs like a well-oiled machine, the collaboration is triple redundant. The entire business supply chain requires only minor finetuning. Everyone is engaged in continuous quality improvement. Team spirit is optimal. The search for new technologies has a pro-active signature and is implemented without problems. The training and education policy is fully integrated.

Now please take your time to read through all six levels once again. Be honest and take an intuitive guess: at what level does your organization operate? Just be aware that, equal to a traffic light report, there is no such thing as 'orange-and-a-half'. Equally so, there is no such thing as, for example, 'organizational maturity level 1.6'. You might be able to calculate your level to ten decimal places, but if you're not on level 2, you're still on level 1. Determining the organizational maturity level of your organization is ruthlessly confrontational, but it can also be enormously revealing ánd liberating.

Let's be straight forward about the two extremes on the organizational maturity scale. In today's corporate business world, levels 0 and level 5 simply can't exist. Existing on level 5 is like living in Utopia, where everything is ultra-organized to the extent that when you feel the slightest urge to complain about something to your colleagues at the coffee machine, a ceiling plate will open and a big metal gripper will grab you by the chest and throw you clear out of the building. 'Heck, where did Bubba go?' – 'Dunno, a moment ago he was right there!' Good riddance, because nothing and no one is allowed to smudge the Utopian Ideal, the Ultimate Self-Cleansing Organization.

I'm exaggerating of course, but who would want to work in a company that is flawless all the time? Think about it! I would argue that it is *equally unattractive* to work in Dystopia and in Utopia. It is just as awful to work at organizational maturity level 5, as it is on level 0. They are two sides of the same coin. At level 0 you would be living in Dystopia, the dire and dark opposite of Utopia, where chaos rules. Everything is disorganized to the extent that it doesn't matter what you do, it will fail. Everybody's running around like fools in a treadmill, panicking like rats in a maze. Nagging and whining is the standard form of communication and there's nowhere to hide from the disorder, the utter chaos and mayhem.

In Utopia there are no challenges, in Dystopia everything is a challenge. Utopians are disturbingly serene, Dystopians are ominously agitated. In Utopia everybody smiles all the time, in Dystopia everybody cries all the time. Utopians are always agreeing with everything, Dystopians are fighting you all the way. You get the picture; both environments are without appeal and they simply can't exist in today's world. You wouldn't want to be caught dead in either of them.

How to differentiate organizational maturity

As we have seen, in real life, projects very easily get the better of us. It is extremely challenging to manage projects successfully whilst concurrently maintaining a high level of organizational maturity. In fact, it is quite rare. Low organizational maturity levels lie at the root of many project problems so we must address it accordingly. Be that as it may, no maturity model is complete without nuance. It requires a differentiated approach based in reality, because every individual, every group, every organization and every project has its natural maturity boundaries. The sky is nót the limit here. We must consider *Five Differentiating Aspects of Organizational Maturity*.

1. How mature are you?

At which level do the separate parts of the organization (or separate groups and individuals) rate and how does the company score overall? How mature are the leaders and followers, the managers and employees, when they are observed vertically, horizontally and diagonally throughout the collaboration? And how do you measure that? Most of the time a collectively conducted online maturity level test will suffice, as I will describe further on. But on occasion you might want to conduct an *integrated maturity level assessment,* determining the current level by an independent external agency. Either way, this so-called *baseline measurement* will proof to be very useful before initiating a change endeavor or transformation program of any significance. Because such an assessment is the ultimate *jointly agreed objective framework* to which you can measure your entire change strategy.

2. How mature can you get?

Not every organization can make it to every (higher) level of maturity, no matter how much you want it and no matter how often you are led to believe it. The intricate combination of size, business type, branch, industry, geography, history, corporate culture, level of leadership and human resources policy limits potential growth. Factors such as employee turnover, lack of organizational coherence and ego-determined leadership inhibits growth. It is prudent to recognize, acknowledge and confess to your company's limitations.

3. In what tempo do you wish to grow?

Not every company grows and changes at the same pace. It's not just a matter of measuring the current level and extend that line towards the next desired level. The rate of change is determined by more than one single factor. How many other change projects are running? Is everyone able to cope? (Read: who might not have the capacity and potential to grow to a higher maturity level?) What is the communication strategy? Both in tempo, direction and potential there are limits in our ability to change human behavior. The most challenging and most difficult aspect of change is not 'getting it started', 'keeping it going' or 'communicating about it'; it is breaking the force of habit. Pushing a major change in maturity at high speed without considering the current level is extremely risky. Rushing things doesn't serve any purpose; temporizing and dosing is an artform.

4. Can you remain mature?

Stagnation equals decline, especially when it comes to organizational maturity. Reaching the next higher level of maturity is most definitely worth celebrating, but it doesn't warrant you to rest on your laurels. Your work environment is in a constant state of change (read: decay) and we are only temporarily able to

create a sense of order. At best. So, once you reach that higher level of maturity you need to hold on tight because gravity is constantly pulling you down. It takes energy, effort and determination to keep that up, let alone aiming for the next higher level. Dig in first, set up a defense parameter, go in observation mode for a while, correct and adjust. Only thén are you able to start developing a strategy for your next move. Because that next hurdle will prove to be exponentially more difficult to cross than the previous one.

5. How mature is your environment?

Once you've figured out at what level you're at, once you've accepted that you might not reach the summit (and you've accepted that fact), once you recognize that you will have to 'temporize and dose' to get to that next higher level and once you are prepared to deliver the work it takes to maintain it; you're still not there, I'm afraid. Consider this: do you even know at what level the direct *environment* of the organization and/or the project is operating? Will your customers still understand you when you suddenly start acting like a highly mature professional? What if they are extremely low mature amateurs? Are the subcontractors that you hire to help you up to your standards? Or might they even be *more* mature than you and your organization?

Mopping with the tap running

According to an inventory from Ruud van Wee, professor of transportation policy at the Delft Technical University the Netherlands, the delays and cost overruns on large infrastructural projects between 1980 and 2015 have cost the Dutch government around 100 billion euros. Especially the high-speed

bullet train between Amsterdam's Schiphol Airport and Antwerp has been far more expensive originally estimated In the Dutch newspaper *De Telegraaf,* the professor explained: 'I was stunned about it myself'. He noted that these 100 billion euros was a rough estimate and that he took a cautious approach when doing the calculations. 'When you add it all up like that, your head starts to spin at the staggering amounts of money that are incurred in connection with the undue investments made in the last couple of decades'.

According to Van Wee, the largest excess is the high-speed train track, which cost € 7.8 billion instead of the estimated € 3.5 billion. There are other examples such as *De Betuwelijn*, the rail link between Rotterdam's harbor and the German Rhine area, which was originally budgeted at € 2.5 billion, but ultimately run up to €4.7 billion. And *De Noord-Zuid Lijn*, a new subway track in Amsterdam, estimated to cost € 2.4 billion and, by the time of this writing, already exceeded its budget by more than € 1 billion. All these vast infrastructure projects exceeded their timelines with many years. That's a whole lot of botching up at the highest level.

So indeed, growing in organizational maturity is no small matter. But does this imply that the execution of complex (highly mature) projects is impossible for inexperienced (low mature) organizations? Not necessarily. Sometimes the 'local heroes' from organizations with maturity levels 1 and 2 (who themselves might be operating at level 3 or higher) deliver a surprising one-off success, even when their immediate surroundings fall victim to chaos. They simply

create a protective safety bubble, albeit it temporarily, that surrounds the project, to protect it from disturbances and outside threats.

Does this mean that perfect projects are impossible? Not at all. A perfect project (which definition might surprise you in the end) is a possibility and an opportunity for everyone, but only if we recognize, acknowledge and confess to the limitations of our organization and its people therein (as described in the five previous questions about organizational maturity) and only if you take proper precautions. And that starts by nót playing with our smartphones in the back of the class at Project Management School.

The parent company of a large trading firm decides to implement an integrated, companywide change process. It is going to be a completely new way of working, that will change the entire supply chain from purchasing to production to warehousing to sales to delivery. The company holds several large sales departments and nobody will be able to escape this change program.

The employees of one department in particular, the sales back-office, are traditionally stuck to their old ways of working. People have their own idiosyncratic way of doing things, with processes loosely hanging by the threads, acting extremely 'flexible' and 'non-bureaucratic' on the one hand but labor-intensive and error-prone on the other. Most have found their own little niche of doing things, but it is clearly outdated and highly inefficient. Hence the initiated change program.

For transition and change management, an external consultancy firm is contracted. It's an extremely professional and highly mature service provider

that deals with these kinds of programs on a daily basis. They are eager to comply with the assignment and assure the customer to 'go about it diligently'. That pleases the executive board because they want to come clean as quickly as possible, as they have grown excited about all the 'advantages' (read: cost savings) this change program is going to deliver. Hence, they decide to go for the fastest (and least expensive) of the offered implementation and execution scenarios.

That turns out to be a big mistake. The newly implemented business process and the service provider supervising the process are highly mature, let's say level 4. However, the sales departments and the executive board think and operate on a much lower maturity level, say level 1. That 'voltage difference' creates a clash. According to a (silently ignored) internal research report, more than a quarter of the involved staff is not even capable of reasoning on that high level of maturity, let alone act on it. All over sudden it is required for everybody to understand the supply chain in its entirety, as an intricate, interconnected web of actions, responses and responsibilities instead of separated islands operating in sub-optimal isolation. Simultaneously they must learn to adapt to a wide range of new processes, procedures and newly adopted ICT systems.

But nobody seems to be actively aware of these vast differences in knowledge and maturity levels and nobody raises a finger. At high speed, everybody is rushed through these fundamental changes and after completion, the whole thing falls apart like a house of cards. In the first few months after going live, everything literally goes berserk. Customer orders are lost, incorrect purchases are made, goods are incorrectly registered, stored, transported and invoiced.

The customers are furious. Waves of sheer panic engulf the company and, in the end, it takes more than a year and tens of millions of euros in cost to recover, stabilize and restore balance. The position of many employees is ultimately 'reevaluated' (read: people are transferred or terminated), because they simply cannot cope with this sudden increase of maturity level. As was perfectly predicted in the internal analysis report that was so conveniently buried at the time. But nobody dared to say, 'I told you so' and in no time it's business as usual again, which was a good as a guarantee that it would happen again. And again. Ad infinitum.

In this example, the company's loss of goodwill with its suppliers and customers was considerable. In hindsight, the situation could have been easily avoided if the executive board had shown more interest in the 'state of mind' of managers and employees on the actual work floor beforehand, perhaps aided by some 'external eyes'. Then they would have been able to see upfront that a change of this magnitude was a bridge too far. They could have changed the pace of change in accordance with the actual capacity and ability of the organization and the people therein, instead of going for the quick win and the fast buck.

Parouzzi's Principle

Given a bad start, trouble will increase at an exponential rate.

There's a striking similarity between these kinds of maturity level change disasters and the compulsory habit to stuff standard methodologies and technologies down the throat of an organization. We seem to suggest that

sending everyone to project management school will guarantee that all projects will soon be successful'. And we appear to project the message that by working according to project management methodology X, process Y and procedure Z, all of our problems will soon be solved. But when it is my turn to speak, I'm inclined to say: *high expectations are the basis for chronic disappointment*. And chronically disappointed people will nag and whine and infest others with that non-constructive attitude.
When we unilaterally put our trust in machines and methodologies, we overlook three essential factors.

1. *Only few of the well-known project management methodologies, processes and procedures address the leadership that is required to put it into practice. We assume that methodology guarantees success.*
2. *Major project management institutions such as Prince2, PMI, PMBoK, IPMA, Lean and SCRUM teach and educate the highest levels of organizational maturity, but they rarely consider the existing maturity level of the environment, the organization and the individual.*
3. *All project management methodologies, processes and procedures underestimate the level of individual resilience (read: professional assertiveness) that is required to survive a world of continuous change.*

A certified project manager lacking leadership skills, a highly mature project process within a low mature organization, a docile individual operating in a rapidly changing environment: it all has a very low success rate, it 'reeks of disaster'. Take the SCRUM methodology for example. In rugby, scrum or 'scrummage' is the term applied when the game resumes after a technical violation has been made (well, actually in reality, in a scrum one team tries to shove the other out of its way to get back in the game). As an implementation

methodology, it is applied to project- and process-based software and product development. SCRUM development teams are self-managed, performance is measured daily and products are delivered in 'sprints'. During the daily 'scrum meetings', three questions are asked consistently: what did you do, what are you going to do and what are your problems?

In theory, the advantages are substantial: effectivity is increased, the progress of team ánd project is closely monitored, obstacles are resolved and the risks are identified and minimized. All of that is swell and dandy and if everyone simply sticks to the rules of the game, nothing can go wrong, right? Then why do projects keep failing? When we all SCRUM on a daily basis, and become lean, mean, project management machines, why do we keep botching it up? Why aren't we successful all the time?

PROJECT SURVIVAL TIPS

Does this sound familiar? The project has turned into a disaster zone and you're up to your eyeballs in damage control. What must you do?

Don't be led astray

Countless enthusiastic initiatives for improvement failed ingloriously because of truisms like 'we've heard you', 'it's on our radar' and 'we'll see about that when time comes'. Equally frustrating are comments such as 'that's not how we do things around here', 'we've never done it like that before' and 'do you always talk like that?' When a team serves the greater

good of the organization by working the problem and providing workable solutions, that ought to enough, wouldn't you agree? So, don't be led astray by project politics and the natural resistance to change. Calmly underpin your arguments in unity and lay out the consequences of inaction. Don't do that alone; use the power of the group, work with your team. Be kind but vigilant, show understanding without losing willpower. Don't forget: if you give up the fight and start howling with the wolves, you're factually rewarding bad behavior. You will then have become part of the problem instead of the impending solution.

Not every organization or individual is suitable for or compatible with highly mature processes like SCRUM. Self-steering teams are awesome for sure, but at the end of the day, we still need true, natural leadership. Those daily morning meetings are only effective if they're lead properly and everyone has done their homework. Because SCRUM is complicated, demanding, meticulous, structural and compelling. The problem is that people are not. People are prone to be simplistic, careless, chaotic, ignorant, shortsighted and stupid, especially within high pressure cooking systems like projects. If we don't watch out, we all become project management morons.

In any group of resistant, immature, capricious and docile people, all those fancy project management rules and regulations are easily dismissed. And then there you are, standing at your SCRUM bulletin board with your pink, yellow and green post-its, preaching to a bunch of people that couldn't care less about your good intentions or high maturity level. They simply won't do what's required and that, my project management friends, is botched up project guaranteed.

The Project Botch-Up Test: How successful are your projects?

Mark is an ambitious 29 year old project manager. For several years now, he's part of a group of fifty colleagues within a huge ICT company that takes on mainly large-scale international ICT projects and programs. At the end of each year, a major event is organized to discuss the organizational and financial results of the year passed. Rowan, the head of the department, skilled in the art of window dressing, always drops the same line: 'Congratulations everybody, we have done better once again'. But the reality is different. In fact, there's lack of leadership, no consistent management reporting whatsoever, business is conducted in an ad hoc manor and there's lack of overview. Chaos rules. The department is in a big mess, job performance is poor and money is wasted. Every day symptoms are bravely fought, and many projects fail miserably, to the discontent of many customers.

It is the third year in a row that Rowan announces the same old 'good news'. Mark doesn't think things have improved at áll and he decides to take a walk on the wild side. In fact, he's fed up, and this time he raises his hand and simply asks: 'Thanks for that. But if I may inquire: better with reference to whát?' Rowan is taken aback. He didn't expect that kind of a question. So he says: 'Well, uhm... isn't that obvious? Better than before, better than last year, better than when we first started...'. Mark however, stands his ground and replies: 'Okay, but then how did we dó this year? I mean, as a project management department, what did we establish as a baseline measurement, what are the subsequent targets, and, with reference to that baseline, what are the actual results?'

Rowan grunts and growls a little bit and takes the high level management position: 'Well, as you know, we're in de midst of setting up a comprehensive reporting structure with a program management office and a sophisticated management cockpit system that will ...'. Mark interjects him: 'Yes, I know all that, but we're at it for over three years now and it is still a long way from complete. It's not even partially operational at this time. Projects are failing all over the place. So, I ask you again: better with reference to whát? How can we say that we've done better, if we haven't established a jointly agreed objective frame of reference to substantiate such a statement?'

Being frontally confronted like that, with nowhere to hide and with the entire department looking at him, Rowan is now clearly getting annoyed. With his head slowly turning red in anger and frustration, he stops to think for a minute. And his reply is brilliant. With gleaming complacency, he looks Mark square in the eyes: 'Well, I'm dead certain, if we hadn't done things the way

we did them, everything would have been far worse'. Mark shakes his head, sighs deeply and says: 'Worse with reference to whát?'

Does your company, organization or department struggle with projects? Have you always wanted to know how bad things really are in your neck of the woods? Now's your chance to determine the botched up level of your own work environment. *The Project Botch-Up Test* is a reality check of how mature – or immature – your project management work environment rates. This test transcends the Anti-Botch Up Quadrant and the Status Totalus as discussed in Chapter 3, because it encompasses the individual, the group ánd the project organization surrounding it.

The Project Botch-Up Test allows you to establish the relationship between your company (organization, business unit, department, team) and your projects, by simply determining the actual botched up rate. I use the term 'botched up rate' here as the degree of *immaturity* of a project, directly related to its environment (being the organization and the individuals therein). The higher the botched up rate, the lower the success rate. You can determine this in four easy steps.

Step 1: The Project Test

This test includes several challenging propositions with which you can (partially) agree or disagree. The propositions are based on the most common aspects of *project management immaturity*. They allow you to make intuitive choices about issues dealing with the quality of project management, the involved leadership and the success rate of all efforts combined. The result is the *project botched up score,* expressed as a grade between 0 and 10. The higher the score, the lower the chances of *project management success*.

Step 2: The Organizational Test

Thus test also offers you several challenging propositions, but now they are based on the most common aspects of *organizational* immaturity. This time you will be challenged to contemplate the way your own company deals with its business and project management processes and the level of professionality of managers and employees therein. The result is the *company botched up score*, equally expressed as a grade between 0 and 10. The higher the score, the lower the chances of *organizational* success.

Step 3: The Project Botched up Score

There is a causal relationship between the maturity level of an organization as a whole and the success rate of the projects therein. Imagine you are a professional project leader operating in an immature work environment. No matter how well you perform, you'll never be able to raise the organizational maturity level of the entire organizational structure surrounding you on your own. Your actual influence and impact is simply too limited. But you can be extremely proficient in your area of expertise, within your own project management safety bubble, protecting your team from outside interference, achieving occasional success without the surrounding organization necessarily picking up on it.

But it's different the other way around. An organization with a high maturity level will design its project environment in such a way that it mirrors its own level. The more mature the organization, the more mature and therefor the more successful its projects. The causation between project management maturity and organizational maturity is expressed by mixing the project botched up score with the organizational botched up score in a formula. This formula equates the *project botched up score*, again expressed as a grade

between 0 and 10. The higher the score, the higher the botched up level, meaning the lower the chances of project success. This is the kind of school report in which you want to score as *low* as possible.

Step 4: The Project Botched up Scale

A picture says more than a thousand words. That's why the project botched up score is positioned on a project botched up scale. This is a one-page-one-view image that reflects three aspects simultaneously: the project botched up score, the project success rate and the alert status of your projects (green, orange, red or blood-red). As a bonus you are also presented with an *indication* of the current maturity level of your project management organization on a scale from 0 to 5. And all of that in less than 10 minutes!

Please note: doing the Project Botched up Test is interesting and educational for sure, but it can also turn out quite painful. Nobody likes to be confronted with a high botched up level, since it implies that the organization and its projects are unsuccessful, unprofessional and immature. Nobody likes to admit that and most people would prefer to hide their heads in the sand like the proverbial ostrich. That's perfectly understandable. However, the test can also be the beginning of something wonderful. Only when we acknowledge that we have a problem, when we admit that *we ourselves* are responsible for it (including the leadership structure within our organization) and only when we confess that we haven't done a heck of a lot about it so far; only thén can we start converting the Fail Trail into a Cycle of Success.

The Seven Consultation Questions

Organizations with a low maturity level exhibit a culture of uncontrolled and

undisciplined consultation: their meetings and gatherings are a big mess. It never seizes to amaze me, but the way we handle the most basic form of communication within human collaborations borders on the insane. Whether we're in close proximity of each other or on Zoom, Teams or Skype, when we discuss status and progress, when we address problems, solutions and ideas for improvement; we continuously botch it up. Ironically enough, the revolutionary automation and digitization of our work environments plays a major role in our communication's inefficiency and ineffectiveness.

It can always be worse

From meta-studies conducted on a global scale it is established that two-thirds of all projects end in failure, measured against the original goals in time, money and quality. But it can always be worse. In a 2001 study, Mercer Consulting concluded that 80 percent of technology projects cost more than they generate. Of course, that happens unconsciously. Expenses are always underestimated and revenues are always overestimated (Dosani, 2001). The University of Oxford researched the success of IT-projects and concluded that 84 percent ended in failure (Sauer & Cuthbertson, 2003). The British Computer Society came up with the same staggering percentage: only 16 percent of projects is successful (Jacques, 2004).

During meetings and gatherings people find refuge in their machines (laptops, smartphones, tablets) to avoid doing what they're supposed to do: exchange

ideas and reach explicit common agreement on the way forward. Social group conformation amplifies this phenomenon; we find it hard to address each other on our addiction to the smartphone and laptop. Everywhere we go, there they are. Be that as it may, maintaining a strong consultation structure is tough enough in a normal business environment, but within projects the lack thereof is specifically devastating.

A lax, inefficient and immature consultation structure is one of the hidden causes of project failure. Combined with implicit misunderstandings (as described in Chapter 3 - the opposite of explicit agreement) a poor meeting culture festers like a malignant growth at the base of your project. Unproductive gatherings are a waste of time and energy too. The fact that we attend meetings and spend lots of time means diddly squat. Oftentimes, the way they are conducted implies a degree of intelligence, accuracy and progress that is simply not there.

Professional consultation is a true art form. From 'bilaterals' to team gatherings to top brass executive committee meetings; all layers of a project are interspersed with consultation. The poorer the consultation, the more it will self-amplify because of social conformation, countless biases and lack of (personal) leadership. Botching up our meetings will only increase the botched up level of our projects.

Gerald is a young and ambitious project manager. He has just landed a new assignment and now he is going to have to put is shoulder to the wheel. From a technical perspective his new project is quite complicated, but some changes to the primary business process are challenging as well. After a few weeks of

having detailed discussions about scope and content with his team, he has been invited to join the steering committee meeting. Decisions must be made.

Being a major in business economics and well versed in the theory of project management, Gerald has studied the correlation between hierarchy and intelligence. The higher you climb up the chain of command, the less important the details become, so you would expect. At the highest level, you expect an atmosphere of dedication, overview, insight, leadership and decisiveness. Detailed (technical) knowledge is expected at the lower echelons. As project manager, Gerald is positioned in between both levels of information processing. Het gathers all relative substantive information from the lower levels to be swiftly decided upon at the higher levels. But when his first executive board meeting starts, his jaw drops to the floor in astonishment.

Not only is Gerald completely ignored, but the entire meeting is the epitome of useless chaos. It starts too late, far too many managers are at the table, no meeting minutes are taken, the executives play with their laptops and smartphones, coming and going as they please, because they get phone calls continuously ('I've got to take this...'). Most of the time is wasted on endless discussions about the most trivial technical details. As it turns out, the steering committee consists of highly educated, university degree technical specialists that are easily seduced by any diversion to hide in their comfort zones.

Gerald is reluctant to intervene, because the chairman of the steering group is also his client and principle. In the meanwhile, nothing gets decided. Most carefully prepared 'rubber stamp issues' are postponed till next month (being

the frequency of the meeting) and Gerald gets increasingly restless. But he is afraid to lift his finger, hesitant to ask the chairman what the actual purpose is of this executive committee and reluctant to inquire about the minutes of the previous meeting. And so it goes: nothing happens, no progress, no decisions; everything just muddles through until the bubble bursts.

Consultation is intrinsically linked with human collaboration and leadership. Without proper consultation there is no alignment and in the absent of alignment, problems, issues and conflicts easily grow out of hand. Sometimes we meet too much, sometimes too little, but most of the time we just meet inadequately. Fortunately, everyone attending a meeting has the ability – I'm almost inclined to say the *obligation* – to intervene. It's not up to the chairman alone; you yourself can (and therefore múst) intervene at any time, preferably at the very beginning of any type of meeting. As we've seen when we discussed the PRIC-lists, you have the responsibility to lift your finger and start asking the right questions. In this case I call them the *Seven Consultation Questions*.

About project meetings

You will no doubt recognize them, the project meetings of sorts:

- That consistently start late with ever changing and incomplete attendance;
- In which attendants enter and exit the meeting at random, either making or taking calls on their smartphones;

- In which everyone is playing around with their laptops, tablets and smartphones all the time;
- That digress into random and chaotic discussions with no end in sight;
- That discuss and debate the smallest details extensively;
- Where meeting minutes are not being taken, despite the constant exchange of useful information;
- That are constantly dominated by the ones with the biggest mouth;
- That are characterized by a sheer lack of decisiveness;
- That are uninteresting and unappealing to the point of utter boredom;
- In which nobody seems to be aware of any problem with of all of it whatsoever.

Before we go through them, please keep in mind that it is not the questions themselves that matter. Anyone can ask them, but they only become useful if you *follow up* on them. But if you hesitate to ask them, if you wait too long, the questions in and of itself become mute and you have therefore become part of the consultation problem. You will be sucked right into the mechanism. 'Have the guts to ask, the audacity to interrupt and the balls to follow up', I always say. Yell 'S.T.O.P.!' if necessary. Make some noise!
These are the Seven Consultation Questions:

1. What is the purpose of this meeting?
Easy question, tricky to answer. Asking this question also implies: what is the required output of this meeting? What do we want to achieve and what are the consequences if we fail to deliver? In other words: what the heck are we doing here and what are we doing this for?

2. Who is gathered at the table?

If you're not familiar with your companions, simply propose that everybody introduce themselves first. Who are you, what's your role, and why are you here? And if it's not clear what the added value of an attendee is, inquire gently but persistently. When you discover that your attendance has no added value, kindly indicate that you will not be attending the next time around.

3. Who's keeping track of time?

In a limited amount of time only a limited number of topics can be discussed. You need someone to monitor the time to address as many topics as possible. That timekeeper must be authorized by the group to be allowed to intervene. Most of the time the chairmen will be the timekeeper, but if that doesn't work – not every chairman is equally proficient at it – appoint someone else.

4. Who will draft the action list?

Somebody is going to have to write something down. And I'm not talking about personal notes, neither am I talking about an overly elaborate meeting report: I 'm talking about an actual action list. Somebody must set it up, communicate it and maintain it. Who volunteers? An action list must be solely limited to three things: what needs to be done, who must do it and when does it have to be ready? (including the relationship with other actions and action owners).

5. When will the action list be communicated to whom?

Besides present company, there might be other stakeholders interested in the outcome of the meeting. Who are they? How will they be informed? It is not necessarily the responsibility of the chairman to perform this task (sometimes a Project Management Office will do it), but then it must be explicitly and overtly delegated. The action list must be sent no later than the next business day, regardless of how long it will be before the next scheduled meeting.

6. Where is the action list from the previous meeting?
If this meeting is a follow-up to an earlier one and you are attending for the first time, ask where the action list is. If there isn't one, then how do you know what was discussed the last time and who was going to do what, why, when and how? When discussing old and new actions, avoid 'does not! / does too!'-debates (or other low mature interactions) and record only the mutually agreed individual actions (read: connect one action to one action owner). Collective joint *agreements* may be recorded separately.

7. 'Will everybody please, at the end of the meeting, not forget to switch their smartphones, laptops or tablets back ón again.'
Put it exactly like that. These days it has become the new normal to use our laptop, tablet and smartphone wherever we go. Don't be a part of that social conformation disorder. Switch them off (or put them in silent mode) and keep them out of sight. Use pen and paper to make notes. This is a meeting, not an office floor. Confront each other about that. The less we fidget with our fancy machines, the more effective the meeting will be and the sooner we'll be out of there to start doing the actual work.

You might receive some negative reactions to your inquiries. That's understandable. Low mature, unprofessional consultation rarely stems from deliberate acts of sabotage. We're all human, conforming to each other and copying each other's behavior. In most cases the response will simply be something like 'Oh yeah, that's a good one, thanks!' Our degenerated consultation culture is a human trait caused by a combination of poor leadership, social conformation, low organizational maturity and too few fingers in the air. Now your fingers can make a difference.

→ **TIP:** There is a prevailing taboo in corporate consultation culture: the choice of attendance. Imagine you are sitting in on a project meeting where the Seven Consultation Questions have no effect and you reach the conclusion that this meeting has no added value whatsoever (not in general and not for yourself). That fact will now grant you the right to excuse and exclude yourself from the meeting. Kindly inform the chairman as such, get up and leave. You simply state that if at any time in the future the usefulness of this meeting – and your presence in it – is reestablished, you will gladly attend again. Because you dó have better things to do. Such an expression of resilience will prevent you from spending so much time on useless meetings that you don't get around to your normal duties. This is professional assertiveness par excellence. Are you up to it? Just give it a try!

CHAPTER 5

EVALUATE, SHARE AND CELEBRATE

Project failure is persistent, because people easily forget about past misery and eagerly jump to the next challenge, sweat still pearling on their foreheads. 'Those who cannot remember the past are condemned to repeat it' (*). The effort to determine what went well and what could have been better must be cherished, shared and celebrated to break the vicious Fail Trail.

(*) Quick note and duly noted: this quote is falsely contributed to Sir Winston Churchill (1874-1965), because it originates from the Spanish-born American philosopher George Santayana (1863-1952), The Life of Reason, 1905, from the series Great Ideas of Western Man.

About the definition of project success

According to leadership-thinker Steven Covey effective people have seven habits that allow them to be successful in their personal and professional lives:

1. *Be proactive:* take responsibility for your own behavior and don't blame others.
2. *Begin with a target in sight:* visualize the end result and ensure a clear vision on your direction.
3. *Separate primary and secondary priorities:* focus on the most important and not necessarily the most urgent matters.
4. *Think in terms of win-win:* try to find solutions that ensure benefit for all parties involved, including yourself.
5. *Understand yourself before you try to be understood:* listen to understand the other person and make people around you feel like they are winners.
6. *Find synergy:* be open to crispy fresh new ideas. Become a promoter, a trailblazer and a pioneer of innovation.
7. *Apply a sharp saw:* don't rest on your laurels, but always try to improve on yourself. Try to preserve a persistent eagerness to learn and investigate.

PROJECT SURVIVAL TIPS

Does this sound familiar? The project has turned into a disaster zone and you're up to your eyeballs in damage control. What must you do?

Avoid ad hominem attacks

Whatever happens, all behavior has consequences. Everybody is part of a collective, no matter how ego-centric or egoistic some species of mankind may posture. In collaboration you will inevitably come across individuals that have more hierarchical 'power' than you do, who's actions have more

impact than yours, but as a member of day to day project life, you hold the repository of truth and reality. Make sure you don't turn that asset into a personal vendetta or witch hunt. Reasonableness and fairness are key concepts here. How do you achieve *optimal* results (please note: minimum and maximum results don't exist) in your attempts to improve the situation? You might want to try the *indirect approach*: focus on what went well first, combine that with a few substantiated and well-meant compliments, give it a minute, and only thén ask what could have been done better. Remember: the need of the many always outweigh the need of the few (or the mighty one), which is true in general, but it specifically holds truth in the wonderful world of projects.

As a prudent reminder at the beginning of every change endeavor, we should add Covey's Seven Habits to a generic project kick-off checklist, before we start running wild on projects. Fortunately, when push comes to shove, individuals are more prone to order than to chaos. It's true, we seem to like chaos more, because it relieves us from our responsibilities. After all, in the Land of Dystopia everyone and no one is responsible. But when properly guided we prefer order, insight and overview.

That is cause for optimism, but the balance is fragile. Perfect order and total chaos are at the two extreme ends of the spectrum and when we leave it up to chance and social group conformation, we may collectively sway in the direction of either extreme. To make the difference, we need to focus on natural leadership, strive for high organizational maturity and encourage individual resilience. Thusly we prevent the descend to chaos on the one hand (entering Dystopia) and the death of creativity by bureaucracy on the other (entering

Utopia). Finding the right optimum between the two lies at the core of the Perfect project.

According to a 2002 study by White and Fortune, surveying 995 project managers, the following factors were mentioned as reasons for project success. In other words, this is what project managers call a Perfect Project:

– *Meets the user requirements;*
– *Meets the quality standards;*
– *Meets the objectives of the organization;*
– *Completed within the allocated time;*
– *Completed within the available budget;*
– *Has added value;*
– *Has a minimal of business disruptions.*

In one of the annual studies conducted by the Standish Group, surveying more than 30,000 ICT-projects in the United States, the involved ICT-directors were asked what they thought were the most important requirements for project success. In other words: what does it take to realize a Perfect Project? This is what they came up with:

– *Small(er) projects;*
– *Strong involvement of users;*
– *Strong involvement of senior management;*
– *Use experienced project managers;*
– *Clearly define the business goals.*

According to the Standish Group, if this top five of requirements for success is

met, projects will have a 65 percent chance of turning into a success. It sounds so easy, doesn't it? It's not that we don't know where to look for project success and we've written it all down a million times before. Yes, we've all been through it, experienced the agony of botched up projects, and we know what to do to clear up the mess. But don't you see? As evident as these success factors are, we won't be able to actualize them without strong natural leadership, high organizational maturity and a broad base of resilience. The theory is useless without the practice.

All success is relative

John is an enthusiastic human resources manager who's been asked to supervise an evaluation session of a recently completed project. Two parties (ICT-supplier Alpha Tech Services, which John works for, and client Royal Dutch Bike Inc., also known as RDB) have just 'successfully' finished a large ICT project. Alpha Tech Services (or ATS) has kindly requested to have the project evaluated 'in company', for the learning benefit of other departments.

Bogovich' Law

He who hesitates is probably right.

At the end of the workshop that was organized to speed up the evaluation process, John draws two conclusions. Firstly, the organizational maturity level of the client RDB was significantly higher than the service provider ATS. RDB continuously acted in a proactive manner and effectively assisted ATS to achieve its goals. This was all paired with a high level of human-

centeredness, directly stemming from RDB's business culture. ATS was thrilled about the client's high organizational maturity level and eagerly tagged along, unaware of the fact that it factually should have been the other way around.

And yes, ATS made a complete mess of everything. The managers on the client's side were forced to adjust and adapt the project planning continuously. This led to weird situations, where RDB was forced to send ATS project team members home to avoid burn-out. In fact, when push came to shove, the client effectively took over the caregiver role of the supplier. RDB's hand was forced, mind you. They had to act this way to achieve the goals of the project and avoid financial disaster. However, John keeps wondering where ATS's own managers were during all this.

Find the differences

For decades now, the USA based *Standish Group of Massachusetts* registers the scores of approximately 30,000 ICT-projects. They distinguish three different categories:

- *Successful*: the project is completed on time, within budget and meets all the functional requirements as originally planned.
- *Problematic*: the project is admittedly completed, but failed to meet its deadlines, exceeded its budget and doesn't meet the anticipated functional needs.
- *Failed*: the project has failed and is terminated prematurely.

The table below reveals some interesting statistics:

	1994	1996	1998	2000	2002	2004	2009
Successful:	16%	27%	26%	28%	34%	29%	32%
Problematic:	53%	33%	46%	49%	51%	53%	44%
Failed:	31%	40%	28%	23%	15%	18%	24%

The best question to ask when you study a table like this is: why isn't any substantial progress made in all these years? Why haven't we reached 100% success in projects already, with all our project management methodologies and certified project managers? Why are we still botching up our projects? If you know the answer, then you've read this book.

That soon became apparent. During the project, ATS employees were put under a lot of internal pressure by senior management, since this was a 'strategic high priority project'. When everything started to go haywire, an additional project manager was shoved into the project to get things back on track. The upper management echelons constantly pushed, from afar, everybody to the limit – and beyond – to keep this important client happy. This led to a lot of bickering and arguing, high levels of stress, plenty of nagging and whining and, on top of everything else, an unfair amount of enforced overtime in the evenings and weekends. Some ATS employees found themselves on the verge of a burn-out.

Ultimately, thanks to RDB's proactive and highly mature collaborative attitude the entire project was finished on time, within budget and within quality standards. Hurray! It was celebrated with a big party and smiling faces all around. Royal Dutch Bike Inc. spared no expense to make this a joyful ceremony. They splurged on T-Shirts, flyers, confetti, snacks and an open bar. Strikingly, as out of thin air, many Alpha Tech Services' hot shots showed up for the festivities, hanging at the bar and hogging attention. Where were they all this time? 'If you didn't know any better', John reminisces, 'and if you'd only been to this party (and didn't ask any questions), you would be inclined to say 'Look here, a successful project, lots of happy people both on demand and supplier's side, how nice…'

Was it a successful project you think? Perhaps for the client, because the advanced new working procedures, software and hardware were running successfully. But from a human perspective, this was evidently a failed project. *No project may deem itself successful when people are suffering as a direct or indirect result*. The goal does *not* justify the means when it makes people buckle and crumble. Therefore, a project may not be deemed successful when only its goals in terms of time, money and quality are met. But when *is* a project successful then? What is the definition of success anyway?

Success is a 'favorable or desired outcome or result', and thus implies that 'something in particular gains approval in the end'. So, success is a result of something happening at the end, when the job is done. But when is something deemed 'good'? Who or what determines that? The definition of the word 'good' alone takes up page after page in the dictionary. It varies from the somewhat traditional sounding 'in the aforementioned capacity being such as one may well desire', to synonyms as honorable, reliable, nice, honest,

righteous, kind-hearted, gracious, merciful, healthy, attractive, sturdy, advantageous, sound, as something should be, functioning well, without defect, striking, fun, the best, useful, suitable, sufficient, reliable, advisable, preferable, to the satisfaction, favorable, prosperous, easy, substantial, without error, favorable, pious, virtuous, honest, sincere, just, equitable, accurate, clear, favorable, happy, graceful, beautiful, friendly, pure, useful and beneficial.

Wow.

Apparently, when everything is said and done, when the dust settles, the outcome of a project must echo this list of synonyms. Every successful project must therefore be honorable, profitable, fun, useful, suitable, just and clean; it must function well and meet the requirements without defect or flaw. Now imagine that these fifty or so synonyms constitute a project status checklist. Take a moment and mentally evaluate your ongoing (or recently completed) project and start checking the boxes that are (or were) applicable. Have you checked more than 80 percent of them?

Projects have a short-term memory

Chantal, the 26-year-old project auditor that we met in Chapter 2, is screening yet another botched up project. It has been going off track for months now and the project doesn't produce anything useful anymore. At arrival she finds a project team that is disillusioned, frustrated and completely stressed out. A lot of nagging and whining is bouncing off the walls caused by a continual lack of insight, overview and perspective. Overtime has become the standard to deal with everything.

During the audit, she cites the following issues:

– The project is offered and sold for half the price , to be finished 'yesterday'.
– At the transfer from sales to execution, there has been no coordination.
– During the transfer no critical questions were asked by the project team and everyone started running from the get-go.
– Goal, scope and output are unclear; implicit assumptions are constantly made to keep the show on the road.
– The steering committee has great difficulties with the decision-making process (read: they are highly indecisive).
– Countless managers and executives are interfering with the project at random, on all levels in the chain of command, even if they are not formally involved.
– The project manager lacks any true leadership ability to deal with these tensions and frictions.

After a few weeks Chantal presents her report to the steering committee. By now it has become clear that the original promises made to the customer cannot be met. The project has already grossly exceeded its original budget (which was crap anyway), it will take much longer to finish, the customer is starting to smell the coffee and the project team is running out of steam. To solve the issues and problems at hand, the company hires a 'crisis manager' from its own ranks. Finally, Chantal adds a list of pragmatic recommendations in her report, 'to prevent any project from going bust like this ever again'. And with that hopeful note she concludes the presentation.

Not too long after the project finished, Chantal accidentally runs into the forementioned 'crisis manager' and, curious as she is, she asks how it all

turned out. Guess what? With agony and anguish, blood, sweat and tears, far too late and way too expensive the project had crossed the finish line. Pfew, good riddance! But now a new project is in the making. Chantal kindly inquires if they have adopted her recommendations as input for this new challenge. 'Well, uh, no, not exactly....' he replies, '...in fact, there are still a few uh, ambiguities in this here new and dandy project, you see, but the sales guys have already confirmed the end date to the customer. So we've uh, already started the work. Kind of. We'll just have to see how the cookie crumbles as we go along, I guess. Something like that...'.

And then his smartphone rings and without further ado he takes the call and makes himself scarce. Chantal can hear him shouting anxiously into his phone – 'Whát? No, no, no! Don't move; I'm on my way!' – before he disappears around the corner.

Rabelais' Axiom

A fool in a high position is like a man on the top of a mountain: everything appears small to him and he appears small to everyone else.

Every week people's houses catch on fire and oftentimes burn completely down to the ground . Only the most striking and sensational ones get reported in the media. Still, and oddly enough, very few people have fire extinguishers or fire blankets in their home. We simply think that someone else's misfortune will never happen to us. Equally, we do not consider the risks that we take driving our cars or doing household chores. Victims of fires, traffic and household activities are a fact of life.

Our memory is short and selective and we quickly forget the pain and suffering from a previous project. We harbor the illusion that the misery was unique and one-off and that our next project will be better. And that, in a nutshell, explains why we have such difficulty learning from our past history and why we are so stubbornly doomed to repeat it.

Spread the word!

So, now we know. Only a third of all projects turn out to be successful with reference to the original goals set for time, money and quality. Each project management methodology suggests that 'nothing can go wrong if you just do what we say', yet still, a third of all projects only finishes with heaps of misery and the remaining third doesn't even cross the finish line. With all the turmoil and sensation surrounding failed projects you would almost forget that successful projects dó exist. If you're lucky, you have been part of it once or twice and you know how it feels. I say: cherish it, share your experiences and spread the word. Because how do you think those projects succeed to manage themselves in terms of leadership, maturity and resilience?

Leadership, maturity and resilience are especially valuable in relation to each other. Failure due to organizational *immaturity* is tracked down by true, natural leadership, top-down ánd bottom-up. High levels of organizational maturity subsequently stimulate your own resilience as well as that of your teammates. It encourages constructive, critical thinking and promotes strong-willed action. Within an environment like that, the resilient team player *dares* to raise his hand, *wants* to yell 'S.T.O.P.!' and *breaths* critical questions. In fact, such behavior is encouraged and rewarded by both sender and receiver.

In these kind of highly mature working environments, a Status Totalus Reports don't get lost in some manager's bottom desk drawer, but they enable Perfect Projects to thrive. If you happen to be so lucky to be part of such a highly professional working environment, make sure you enjoy it to the max. Savor it for as long as you can, sniff deeply, be happy and use every occasion to spread the word!

The Success Analysis Checklist or SAC

With the Problem Analysis Checklist or PAC in Chapter 3 we discovered how to get to the root of organizational problems in general and project problems in particular. We can also apply it to evaluate derailed projects and learn from that knowledge. But what do we do when a project, against all odds, went (extremely) well? How do you share that with others so that they may use it for their benefit? Let's not forget, one third of all projects have always been successful, so we're not living in Dystopia just yet.

For that hopeful purpose, I proudly present the *Success Analysis Checklist* or SAC. It's just as effective as its counterpart the PAC, but this time you can use it to analyze the causes of success and accomplishment instead of failure and disaster. Here they are:

1. What went well?
What a delightful question! Now you can rock-out with a positive description of one of the success factors of the project. Take óne specific element per checklist and try to limit your description to 20 words or less (and yes, that might prove to be quite a challenge, even when we're in the rush of victory).

→ **TIP:** Ring the chimes of success as loudly as possible. Even though the actual description of what went well must be concise and succinct, your project evaluation meeting in which you jointly discuss all the good stuff, does not. So, make it an enthusiastic, stimulating and inspiring exchange of positive energy.

PROJECT SURVIVAL TIPS

Does this sound familiar? The project has turned into a disaster zone and you're up to your eyeballs in damage control. What must you do?

Hail to the hierarchy

Each project has a hierarchy and a subsequent chain of command, with attached organizational charts, however flimsy they are put together sometimes. Stick to it! When you consult someone, ask them what their role is and let them point themselves out in the chart. Only take 'orders' from those who are properly positioned and authorized as such, stemming from that chart. Be especially cautious about instructions or directions from shady characters that have temporary or vague roles and are not listed in the organizational charts. Flat and informal organizational structures are perfectly fine when everything is running smoothly, but when problems arise, there needs to be a strict hierarchy, a clear *chain of command*. If you go high enough you will always find somebody that has final responsibility and authority. Stray frosty and alert though: be sure to follow the solid lines in an organizational chart and beware of the dotted lines, the dead-end streets and the floating rectangles!

2. Why was that?

Things don't go well by themselves; they have a root cause. Something had to be organized in such a way that it allowed this project or project element to be so successful. Think in terms of root cause: what specifically went wonderfully well? How was that achieved, documented and safeguarded? Why did it work so particularly well?

→ **TIP:** Success doesn't come like a bolt from the blue. Answers like 'we simply had it all under control or 'well, it just clicked, we áll clicked, you know' won't do the trick. In human collaboration nothing turns out good 'just by itself'. It is well worth the effort to draw the max out of this why-question. Repeated why-questions encourage collective insight and increase the chances of success in the future.

3. What had to be done to make it so?

Now that we have uncovered the root cause, what subsequent actions were taken to ensure this fortune and glory? Think for instance about 'what happened why, when and how' during the initial stage of the project. In other words: take a closer look the preparation phase: which processes and conditions had to be set up to ensure a positive outcome? And what was necessary to sustain that process during execution?

→ **TIP:** Plenty of project successes stems from the adage (and cliché) 'well begun is half done'. As a result of professional preparation, you can sit back and enjoy the ride during execution, because you don't need to correct and adjust everything all the time. You only need some finetuning here and there. So, be sure to emphasize the power of collaboration and 'supply-chain-oriented-thinking'. How do you encourage and sustain it?

4. What were the positive effects?

Finally, now you can describe the symptoms of something that went *well*. Hurray! Point out the beneficial effects of the collaboration, the processes and the people. Address the short- and long-term results. Ask yourself: what was the added value in all this? Did something or somebody specifically inspire you? Share it with the group and log it for posterity.

→ **TIP:** Engulfed in the ruthless, confrontational and often even bone-dry business side of project management, people rarely share their feelings. It's more hard skills than soft skills that go around. But now you can! So do not hesitate to ask 'soft' questions like: 'What was going through your mind?' or: 'How did that make you feel?' That's not soft, that's super!

5. Who was primarily involved?

Credit where credit is due. Call out the people who were 'go-getters', the driving forces who took the lead, showed proactive leadership and possessed the skills, the courage and the enthusiasm to push through. Focus especially on the employees on the work floor. Call them by name and surname, put them right there in the spotlights. The Success Analysis Checklist is all about putting people on shoulders, lifting them up. Don't be shy, go sky high!

→ **TIP:** It's perfectly fine to express praise in a creative way. Bask your stars in the limelight with a reward that transcends the perfunctory flower bouquet or a lame € 10 gift certificate. You don't want to insult your MICS, your Most Important Contributors to Success. Make the entire project stand the test of time, so that it becomes something you will fondly remember for years to come.

6. What kept the success going?

It's a true sight for sour eyes to have all the components of a project come together. It's far more than simply describing a process, implementing a procedure or turning switches and pushing levers on a machine. Ask: what was the human factor behind the durability of the success? What made man stand aside from method and machine?

→ **TIP:** Emphasize on the execution and closure phase of the project. Positive-constructive behavior is extremely contagious in well-structured, well-managed and all-inspiring project environments. Within its circumference, it is the people that control the method and the machine. They proactively chase information; they emphasize the good attributes of something (or somebody), instead of constantly nagging and whining about the negative. Be sure to praise that aspect of collaboration; it is sheer anti-complaining!

7. What needs to be done (by whom and when) to secure and safeguard this success?

Two things are important when project success has been accomplished: everyone involved in the project itself must be enabled to cherish and repeat the positive experience and everyone in its vicinity must be given the opportunity to recognize and amplify it. So, capture the project's light, be enthusiastic about it and spread it around through every conceivable (social) media platform you can think of. It is 'positive marketing and promotion' *par excellence,* because why shóuldn't everybody learn from the positive experience and feel good about it?

→ **TIP:** When everything is finally logged down for posterity, you may shake

it off. Go bowling, paintballing, bungee-jumping or whatever you desire and make sure you end up in a bar or dancing somewhere. Collaboration success really takes root when we adhere to the *Party Fire Triangle*: people, music and alcohol. Take a load off and submit yourself to the pleasures of life. Is there no money left in the budget? Take care of it yourself and chip in. Actually enjoying success, to realize that everything went well for a change, is harder than it seems. Don't be tempted by the next assignment; tomorrow is another day and I can assure you, there will be plenty of other projects for you to perfectionize.

Projects are usually described based on their specific content or type: ICT or infrastructure, technical or functional, business process-based, tailored to a specific branch, business or industry, local, national or international. Boring and dry stuff. Regrettably, that conceals the generic and unique role that people play in projects: *people are key to success*. Both the Problem Analysis Checklist and the Success Analysis Checklist allow us to include and emphasize the role that *people* play in a project. Unravel it, capture it and make the information widely available and accessible, so that others can benefit from it for generations to come. The results from these checklists, both PAC and SAC, lay a strong foundation for future success. Every new project should not only start and end with them, but continuously apply them along the way.

CHAPTER 6

PERFECTIONIZE YOUR PROJECT

You don't have to accept that projects go haywire or that botching up a change endeavor is 'just the way it is'. Learning about human behavior in social groups enables you to maximize the chances of success and simultaneously assure that everyone involved crosses the finish line in a respectful and healthy manner.

The Project Cycle of Success v. the Project Fail Trail

As we have discovered, there are five generic *causes* of project failure that constitute the *Project Fail Trail*. We have subsequently executed 'positive mirroring' of these five causes one by one, to determine which *actions* we must take to perfectionize our project. Each chapter of this book is dedicated to each one of these five success factors, to help us break the vicious cycle of botched up projects. Together these five success factors form the *Project Cycle of Success*:

1. Don't rush into your project.

'Look before you leap' and 'Pride goeth before the fall' – remember these expressions? Being passionate is great, but it easily transforms into recklessness. Take your time to finish up the preparation phase and incorporate evaluations – good and bad – from other projects. 'We've taken a head start to get things going' might sound diligent, but it lays the foundation of many a catastrophe. Transform that neglected and overgrown border marker between preparation and execution into a heavily barricaded gate in your fortress wall. Be brave to defend it!

2. Dare to stop when it goes haywire.

'Better to turn halfway than to stray completely'. Or in other words: 'a fault confessed is half redressed'. Have the guts to yell 'S.T.O.P.!' – 'Quitting is for wimps!' is something only losers say. To turn around on your path forward demands insight, courage and self-criticism. Botched up projects cost a fortune (and people suffer consequently) and only a fraction of that lost capital is required to maximize the chances of success upfront. Stopping is heroic, rushing is risky.

3. Get to the root of the inevitable problems.

Ignoring problems won't help. Neither will be nagging and whining about it. Problems are just as inevitable (and unpredictable) as the weather. Whoever accepts problems as a starting point, has an edge. A professional and highly mature project organization does not distinguish itself by applying methodology or technical skill, but by transforming inevitable problems into workable solutions. Instead of complaining, think in solutions and start asking positively-critical, open-ended questions. That's the way leadership, maturity and resilience come together.

4. Act like an entrepreneur

Projects are like (miniature) companies. Why would you approach a project differently than you do your business process? Why would you pay less attention to the preparation phase compared to the execution phase? Or execution versus closure? The only difference between a project and a business is the inescapable start and finish date and the pressure it inflicts. Therefore, apply the same skill set that makes your business successful unto your projects and project management processes. And for goodness' sake, regard people as your most valuable asset.

5. Evaluate, share, and celebrate your experiences

Every project provides a gold mine of new experiences and insights. Others may benefit from it, so why not share that information? Don't reinvent the wheel over and over again, but start every project with previous experience, both by yourself and by others. Perfectionize your projects! Don't hesitate to celebrate your success with the people that are dear to you. Being proud of your achievement is not arrogant if it is meant to share common experiences and apply them for the greater good. Applaud your collaboration, applaud yourself and then party away.

Take right and matters into your own hands

You don't have to stand on the sidelines of a derailing project. You don't have to be powerless to act. You can take right and matters into your own hand. Use the power of the group, walk the steps of the Seven-Tiered Hourglass, get to the truth of it all and transfer symptom fighting into actions, problems into solutions and Fail Trails into Cycle of Success with the following measures:

1. The Project Match Test - page
Determine the specific density of your project using the Project Match Test and put the right leader in the right place.

2. The PRIC-lists
Use the PRIC-lists to determine the overall status of your project and your own specific role within.

3. The S.T.O.P.-principle
To stop, to go back and to start over takes guts and courage, but it will deliver glory and save a fortune.

4. The Status Totalus
Determine the overall status of your project and transfer collective intuitive insight into traffic light reports. Nothing provides more clarity than the colours (blood-)red, orange and green.

5. The Anti-Botch-Up Quadrant
Put yourself in this quadrant to determine whether you should cherish, ride out, reconsider or change your position within your project.

6. The Problem Analysis Checklist or PAC
Use the PAC to grab all the inevitable problems by the root and turn them into workable solutions.

7. Think-Tanking with Brainpower
Think-Tank away and use the brainpower of your project team to come up with multiple creative solutions and comparative perspectives in record breaking time.

8. The Project Botch-Up Test

Take the Project Botch-Up Test and determine the botched up-level, the success rate, the alert status and the organizational maturity level of your project and work environment.

9. The Seven Consultation Questions

Use these seven open questions to engage and confront the effectiveness of your project meetings and gatherings and optimize your consultation structure.

10. The Success Analysis Checklist or SAC

Use the SAC to share your positive experience and your success stories with others to protect them from your own pitfalls (and don't forget to party hard in the end!)

Are you in a project that makes you icky and break a sweat? Snap out of it and snap into gear! Does your gut feeling tell you that the project is going nowhere fast? Lift your finger, yell 'S.T.O.P.!' and make your point. *All behavior has consequences* and from now on, yóur behavior can make the difference.

When is a project perfect?

Finally, we have reached the point where we can ask ourselves the million-dollar question: *when can we call a project perfect?* To do that we have to ask ourselves a few questions of conscience first. Can a project be called successful if the goals in time, money and quality have been met, yet everybody kept yelling bloody murder all the way through? Or put in another way: are we allowed to call a project perfect when the method and the machines have worked perfectly, but the people suffered dearly?

In other words: does the goal justify the means? Can the project omelet only be made by breaking egg-people? At his point, my answer won't surprise you anymore: no, no, with all my project heart and soul, no! Botched up projects not only cost a fortune, but they are run at the expense of human beings. As soon as we start to accept that as some kind of 'new normal', we've clearly passed a critical, ethical boundary. And that, my project friends, brings us to the inevitable moral of the story. Because the truth of the matter is, a Perfect Project can only be considered a successful collaboration if it is a project:

- *That proves to have added value for man, method and machine;*
- *From which no one, in no form or fashion, suffers negative effects;*
- *That renders the set of objectives in time, money and quality subordinate to the well-being of the people;*
- *In which leadership, maturity and resilience mutually contribute to success;*
- *In which the greater whole prevails and everyone is at its service;*
- *That creates a safe and constructive environment in which people can grow and glow, and in which all participants are equal and no one is more equal than another;*
- *In which every problem is considered to be something normal and inevitable, not to be complained about and wherein everyone's shoulder is put to the wheel;*
- *In which nobody is required to work beyond a normal workweek and everyone is allowed to go home in time to cuddle partner, children and pets and to spend time on hobbies and sports;*
- *That in the end transfers the joint experience into recommendations that have practical applications for all parties involved;*

- *That will rather turn halfway than stray completely (or won't even be started in the first place) if the added value cannot be established or if it has the potential to do harm.*

Now quietly take some time to reread these characteristics of a Perfect Project. How many of these kinds of projects do you know? How many organizations do you know that have even half of these trades listed in their business plan or mission statement? Make no mistake: each and every one of these characteristics should be perfectly normal for any kind of human collaboration. No degree of gradual collaborative norm degradation must ever justify human suffering.

This list is a conscience check *par excellence* for anyone participating in projects or aspires to become part of it. Because every project can be a Perfect Project and every project *should* be a Perfect Project. We all must, at the very least, *strive* to meet this definition and every project participant, every leader or follower, every human being for that matter, should have it framed and hung on the bedroom wall. *Because people are key to success*. Being part of a Perfect Project is a choice and the choice is all yours.

EPILOGUE

When you first started to read this book, after learning its title and glancing over the blurb, you probably wondered whether there actually ís such a thing as a 'perfect project'. Whether it's not just one big fairy tale. That Fail Trails are the real deal and the Cycle of Success is just an illusion, instead of the other way around. Then perhaps you have been submerged in the disappointment of chronically botched up projects for far too long, because I can reassure you: Perfect Projects actually dó exist, although sometimes they come in disguise. Let me give you an example.

The Chunnel Project

In 1986, construction started on the Channel Tunnel ('the Chunnel') between England and France, which lasted for seven years. More than 15,000 people worked on the project and on May 6th, 1994, for the first time in history, England and the continent were connected by a railway track, 50 kilometers long. From a financial perspective the project was a complete disaster, *but*, from a *technological* perspective it was considered a major achievement. The two sections of the tunnel, starting simultaneously on each side, were joined at the bottom of the English Channel, midway along the track, with a deviation of only a few centimeters! It was an extraordinary example of superb engineering and technical collaboration. Kudos for all those hard skills. In the following analogue example however, things transpired quite differently.

Years ago, when I was working as a project crisis manager, I took over a failing project from a colleague. The two involved parties couldn't get along at all, yet they were forced by circumstances to work together to build an interface, a connection between two separate ICT-systems. The involuntary collaboration turned out to be particularly strained, to put it mildly. For one, the physical offices of both companies were more than 150 kilometers apart.

Secondly, stemming from the past, both companies had some bad blood between them. There were significant differences in work culture and maturity level, lots of implicit misunderstandings, mutual feelings of hostility and other fields of tension that kept them stuck in their own trenches. All communication was done by mail or telephone under a blanket of animosity, continuous overtime and subsequent stress. Moreover, the project had gone over budget significantly.

Jones's Law

One who smiles when things go wrong, thinks about the one he can blame it on.

While I was observing the situation, a metaphor soon popped up in my mind: these are tunnel builders too! One team started digging in England and the other in France. The English call the French frogs and the French call the English roast beef. Both think the other is quite arrogant. Yet, they still must meet each other somewhere halfway at the bottom of the North Sea and once there, it better all connect smoothly, that deeply below land and water.

However they may feel about each other, good collaboration is crucial. It was the same deal with these two bickering companies.

During the first project meeting I attended, they sat across from each other with crossed arms and angry faces. One party snapped: 'We're long ready. We're waiting for y'all over there…'. And the others snapped back, 'We're long ready here for you hombres too. It's taken you all of eternity to get where we're at…' The squabbling went back and forth. 'How interesting…', I thought, '…they can't be both right'. After a few weeks of digging on my own (pun intended), the truth came out. To extend the metaphor: party A drilled a tunnel with three tubes, party B had two tubes. Vertically they missed each other by a couple of meters, and horizontally the approach angle was off by 30 degrees. A botched up job for sure and all for naught. All the work proved useless: all that time and energy wasted and all that money down the drain. And for what?

Of course, the project had to be done all over again, which gave me the chance to start from scratch with a fresh mandate from the steering committee, an overhauled budget and a partially renewed project team. What a splendid opportunity to do better and I welcomed it!

It became a Perfect Project. Within six months, the interface (the 'Digital Chunnel'), was successfully built within time, money and quality. No one had to work óne hour of overtime. Everybody was able to go home on time every day to cuddle partner, children and pets and spend time on hobbies and interests. It was good fun too, some fine collaboration indeed and there was a strong positive drive in the team. No stress, no implicit misunderstandings, only explicit joint agreement resulting in insight, oversight and overview. All

in all, and certainly from a human point of view, it was a very satisfying job indeed.

Did the originally involved parties ultimately appreciate this fine outcome as much? Well, that was a bit of a bummer. As a side effect, this Perfect Project also produced loss of face, and plenty of it too. It destroyed images. We had inadvertently unmasked the ones responsible for the original mess, indirectly revealing that they had been messing around for half a year under the 'supervision' of steering group and stakeholders (who apparently were fast asleep the whole time).

It was also a huge financial loss – the project exceeded its budget by a factor of three – which rendered the associated five-year ICT maintenance contract loss-making from the start. Sourpusses everywhere. Nó evaluation meeting. I wanted to thank my ICT project team for a job well done by hosting a swell party, but the steering group refused to fund it. Nah, well. Ultimately, we drew our own plan and financed our night out in the town ourselves. And painted it too. You can rest assured that we made that last until the early hours.

Inviting Mr. Murphy

Now, why do you think the second project was a great success? Was it because I put my leadership shoulders to it? Sure, that helped. I established the right balance between man, method and machine and between leadership, maturity and resilience. But there were many others, ready and able, leader or follower, that added to the mix. You oftentimes hear that project management is a matter of using common sense. Perhaps. However, it is easy to forget that common sense – or any sense for that matter – is no good without natural,

personal leadership on all levels of the hierarchy and across the entire chain of command. But there's another important reason why the project succeeded: I had invited Mr. Murphy *himself* to join in. During my years in command I have made that a standard practice.

We just held a kickoff. It was on a Friday afternoon, because right after the weekend we would start working full throttle on a large-scale change program. More than a 100 people attended the gathering: managers, team leaders, project staff and team members. Every team had been given the opportunity to present their assignment, however off-the-wall they wanted, which created an atmosphere full of creativity, fun and excitement. But now it was my turn to talk. I had prepared a speech, but at the spur of the moment I realized I had forgotten something. Better still: I had forgotten someóne.

Shoving my speech aside I looked around. I thanked everyone for their effort, but at the same time I scanned the room, acting skittish and jumpy. I looked to the left, panned across, stopped talking mid-sentence and then suddenly gazed to the right, where the main entrance to the conference room was situated. Then I said, 'You're probably wondering who or what I am looking for, huh?' And I glanced at the entrance again, leaning forward and backward. I continued: 'Well, I have invited someone else to this kick-off but I haven't seen him yet. Have you?' Silence. Amazement. Puzzlement.

'Wait a minute, I think he's about to....' I stopped mid-sentence again and walked out of the room, through the main door and shut the door behind me. Outside I waited for a little while, listening as the buzz and chatter got louder and louder and then I went back in. 'I'm sorry. I thought Ed had finally showed up but I guess he's not coming after all. You probably all know him

because you're dealing with him every day. Any clues?' I saw befuddled expressions, eyes begging for answers.

Finally I said: 'I'm talking about Edward Aloysius Murphy, of course, ladies and gentlemen! Yep, from Murphy's Law. I would have loved having him here today, but since he's not coming – he's probably very busy – you will have to invite him to your own team meetings. Because I can assure you, if you think for one minute that you can carry out this change program without him, then you have a thing coming. In that case he will invite himself, unleash hellish damnation and create havoc! Something to think about coming Monday. But now, brothers and sisters, nów we're going to hit the town, having a few drinks to a prosperous project. Strength and honor and good luck everyone!'

Hence forth, Murphy helped us, warned us when we tended to neglect our project plans or become complacent, tipped us off when we were about to hire the wrong people for the wrong jobs and kicked us in the butt when we engaged in chaotic indecisive consultation. Executing a project is a people's job and Murphy assisted us in keeping a critical eye on the deployment of 'human resources'.

We ended up having a ball. Personally, Murphy has taught me that Problem Analysis Checklists, Project Botch-Up Tests, Consultation Questions, Status Totalus Analyses and the likes are excellent guidance towards that Perfect Project. At the same time, he also frontally confronts me with the understanding that all these great tools are meaningless when we don't interlard them with leadership, maturity and resilience on the one hand and solidarity, commitment and investment on the other.

A Perfect Project is still a rare event, but you can change that overnight. Now that you've reached the end of this book, you know what to do, you know how to execute one. Now you can take matters – and their justifications – into your own hands. Ultimately, I haven't told you about project management at all, but everything about *leadership in projects*. I've laid out the groundwork on how you can unmask an immature, botched up project *before* it gets out of hand, maybe even before it's conceived. I've shown you how to save a project – and yourself – from ultimate destruction.

You know now what it takes to lay down the groundwork: *people are key to success*. And you need to put the right leader at the right place. After that, the only thing left to do is to keep your project going, which is a piece of cake, because you've learned that already in Project Management School. I wish you and your teammates strength and honor and plenty of success in the future. Just ensure that you inject a high dosage of natural leadership, establish a highly mature work environment and allow the right amount of resilience in your project. You don't have to be the victim of botched up projects anymore. If something bothers you, just raise a finger and yell 'For crying out loud: S.T.O.P.!'

With ever perfect project salutations,
Bart Flos
Helmond, August 2024.

P.S. All laws, postulates, principles, rules and statements in this book originate from the Dutch translation of the fourth revised edition of Arthur Bloch's book *Murphy's Law* (1977).

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Traditional project management leads to a huge waste of time, money, and human talent. Two-thirds of all projects, large or small, end in failure, always and everywhere. Still, your project can be a success when you put people center stage.

Forget everything you have ever learned about project management up until now. The never-ending Fail Trail can only be turned into a continuous Cycle of Success when you start pushing the right buttons. Look beyond the length of your project nose and get your project people out of the toolbox:

– Put the right leader in the right place!
– Think maturely and act like an adult!
– Lift your finger when you don't like it!

In this book, stacked with frontally confrontational examples, anecdotes and hands-on tips & tricks, Bart Flos offers you a simple yet revolutionary body of thought to unmask botched-up projects, turning them into Perfect Projects.

Bart Flos has over 25 years of experience as project, change and crisis manager and has saved numerous projects from doom and failure. In the Netherlands, Flos is the bestselling author of *Het anti-klaagboek*, available in English as *The Anti-Complain Book*. He is a well-known public speaker and workshop leader, fascinated by the human condition and our struggle with continuous change.

HAYSTACK

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