

Surviving Project Gridlock in Organizations



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Summary: As organizations try to accomplish more and more with projects, the failure rate of projects climbs. This is the crisis tier of project evolution where project density & bad processes drive the failure rate up.

As organizations grow and the number of projects increases, the organization's project failure rate gets worse and worse for several reasons:

- ❑ Seemingly anyone can launch a project whenever they want
- ❑ No one verifies team member availability or their workloads
- ❑ Projects start without assessment of the business value they will produce

Are we in Project Gridlock?

Organizations in the gridlock stage, have a high proportion of staff assigned to multiple projects on top of their real jobs. There is no control over project initiation and no one is prioritizing the projects; every project is Priority #1. With the flood of new projects the total hours of project work far exceed those available. Many of the new projects will be abandoned half way through and large strategic initiatives are often starved for resources.

Projects have vague or mushy scope definitions, budgets are rarely used, no quality standards are set so the only metric is the finish date. Project managers commit to any due date a sponsor mentions without any idea as to the likelihood of hitting it. The normal course on a project is for the team to fumble around guessing about assignments and the purpose of the project until they are about a month from the completion date. Next in 4-5 frenzied weeks they cobble together something and deliver it to the sponsor. Then they spend 6 months fixing it.

The people working on all these projects have unmanageable workloads with lots of overtime and priorities that shift constantly. They face 80-hour workweeks and a parade of PMs striding up to their cubicles, each explaining how their particular project should receive the highest attention because one of the big chiefs is "watching this project very closely."

It is a mess with project failure rates over 70%.

Steering Clear of the Wreckage with Your Project

Later, we'll talk about how organizations can avoid gridlock. But until that happens, you and your projects need to survive. You can make the best of a bad situation with techniques that allow executives to exercise strategic control over your project, make the business value clear and carve out a little authority over your project team.

Survival Technique #1- Give Decision-makers the Data

Think about what the project executive's world is like in gridlock. One PM after another submits unintelligible techno-babble project plans filled with mushy, unverifiable statements about future benefits. These PMs may think they're impressing the executive with their technical mastery. But what they usually just do is convince the sponsor that they have only a faint understanding of the idea of delivering business value. These PMs offer the executive nothing measurable or verifiable. The executive can't track progress without diving head first into the minutia or attending mind-numbing status meetings.

Think of the contrast when you walk in with a 1-2 page broad-brush plan that is written in the user's or sponsor's language. You have hard-edged and measurable business outcomes that are described in operational terms the executive knows, not vague technical deliverables. That's so different than what the executive is accustomed to seeing that you may be greeted with stunned silence. Then when the discussion turns to dates and resources you don't "fight" for your project plan. Instead, you offer alternative costs and durations before the executive asks for them. You are presenting already developed alternatives for finishing faster, doing it more cheaply and delivering more business value. You're actually providing the executive with data to make decisions and exercise strategic control. And because your plan is built on measureable outcomes, the executive can track progress against unambiguous and objectively measurable business outcomes throughout your project's life cycle. Let's use the credibility we gain with this first technique to fuel the things you're going to ask for next.

Survival Technique #2 - Push the Envelope on the Charter

Gridlocked organizations usually do little or nothing to prioritize projects or specifically allocate resources to projects; it's a jungle of competing demands with team members caught in the middle. So, you'll use our project charter to try and remedy this failing for your project. You'll ask the executive to give you, or help you secure, authority to assign work directly to at least some of our project team members and you'll also ask for "ownership" of a specific hunk of their time (i.e. 4 hours a day of Pat Smith's time for the month of September).

The idea of a PM "owning time" and directly assigning work to a project team member who is not their organizational subordinate may be heresy. You'll make it even worse by asking for some reward authority (i.e. input into a "borrowed" person's performance review). This is pushing for a lot but the organization's lack of project processes is a serious risk to the project. "Pushing the envelope" like this before you start work is your best chance for not joining the project wreckage. You ask for these authorities, picking your shots in terms of the "borrowed" people who have significant project accountabilities or who come from lending departments who are notorious for breaking those solemn pre-project promises of "full support."

You may not get all you ask for, or any authority at all for that matter. But you have offered the executive a very inexpensive way to reduce the risk of finishing late and improve the odds of project success. Also, it's far better to discuss these issues now, when your credibility is relatively high than after you're running late and your resource management problems just sound like whining and finger pointing.

Survival Technique #3 – Accountabilities not "To Do's"

In the chaos of project gridlock, it often seems as if the only way to control a project team is with iron-fisted micro-management, detailed "to do" lists and a lot of cubicle-hopping to check on whether project work is getting done. Many PMs also use project status meetings that are go-around-the-table interrogations of each team member. All these processes ensure just one thing: the micro-managing PM is the only person who feels any accountability for the project result.

Remember the work environment of the team members. They're all on several projects and probably being micro-managed on each. On top of that, their other projects suffer from lack of clarity on the scope and business purpose. You, on the other hand, have a clear business outcome and maybe a little bit of authority from techniques #1 and #2. When you hold them accountable for end results instead of hourly tasks, and you trust them by not micro-managing, you may get a bit more commitment to the project's results and their assignment than they give to other projects. That little bit can count for a lot.

Organizational Traffic Control

None of these survival techniques are a cure-all for the weaknesses in the gridlock organization. All they do is improve your odds of success in a bad situation. Organizations eventually address gridlock. The first faltering steps usually include buying expensive software that does nothing to cure the process problems and allowing a committee of PMs to add a layer of paperwork to the mess.

The solution, if it ever comes, is adopting initiation controls, prioritization and a consistent project management methodology across all projects. Then the organization can explicitly set priorities and allocate resources based on them. Of course, the prudent organization takes these steps early to avoid multi-project gridlock.

Summary

For more information on these survival techniques, visit our individual web training courses or get information on in-person training for your organization.