

## MANAGING THE IMPOSSIBLE PROJECT




practical strategies for when all hell breaks loose

### THE ISSUE

In today's complex and competitive business environment, project managers look to established methodologies and software to help manage the resource allocation, scheduling and time management issues inherent in meeting the challenge of implementing multi-faceted projects. While these do provide an important framework for the rigor and discipline required to get the job done, well thought out methodologies and sophisticated software are insufficient to effectively meet the challenge of the increasingly demanding business environment. Even with the best of timeframes, resources and organizational support, now more than ever project management requires the ability to customize strategy, "dance on one's feet", make rapid-fire adjustments and maintain a keen eye on the big as well as the small picture.

Nowhere are those abilities more tested than in the management of "impossible" projects. Confronted with unrealistic timelines, immense pressures from internal and external forces, poor organizational support or any other of a myriad of crippling issues, these projects seem doomed before they are even begun. When cancellation is not an option, powerful strategies must be developed to distill the essential elements from those that would be "nice to have" and to do what it takes to ultimately accomplish what must get done in the face of the daunting circumstances.

There are in fact three powerful strategies that are critical to success in such circumstances. These strategies are aimed at task prioritization, problem resolution and team motivation. Below is a synopsis of such a project and how these strategies were used to cause the desired results.

 <p>PROJECT SERIES</p>	<h2 style="text-align: center;">THE CASE</h2>
	<p>One of the largest regional financial institutions in the Americas, this entity had fallen way behind in their Year 2000 compliance efforts. Faced with an immovable deadline, there was now a scant six months to accomplish what others had been steadily working towards for at least two years or more. In addition, the lack of progress had caught the attention of the Regulatory agency that consequently commenced a series of surprise audits, even as they made it clear that compliance failure would bring dire consequences. With an inadequate project infrastructure and team members dispersed throughout the organization, the situation appeared bleak. To crown it all, given the inadequacy of project strategy and documentation, there was no way to reliably accept what was supposed to have been previously</p>
<h3 style="text-align: center;">HIGHLIGHTS</h3> <p style="text-align: center;"><i>In a situation when time and resources are limited, knowing what not to do becomes just as important as determining what needs to be done</i></p>	<h3 style="text-align: center;">THE STRATEGIES</h3> <p><b>Strategy #1:</b> Align on what ‘not to do’</p> <p>In a situation when time and resources in general are so limited, knowing what not to do becomes just as important as determining what needs to be done. Defining what is absolutely essential for the true success of the project ensures that the limited resources are focused on the tasks that must be done. This prioritization must be done in a systematic way that clearly</p>
	<div style="display: flex; align-items: flex-start;"> <div style="border: 1px solid black; padding: 5px; margin-right: 20px;"> <p style="text-align: center;"><b>Y2K related Project Prioritization</b></p> <p style="font-size: small;">Source: staff interviews, Sept 98 preliminary data collection and analysis</p> </div> <div style="flex-grow: 1;"> </div> </div> <p>balances important business factors. The Prioritization Matrix is a powerful tool that accomplishes this. Figure 1a shows how the critical systems for the financial entity were identified.</p> <p>For each system being considered, an assessment was made of the potential risk of failure as well as the business impact on the organization should the system in question fail. Using this data, the systems were plotted on the Matrix. The result was the Red, Yellow and Green Zone segmentations above. Red Zone systems were clearly business critical and the mission was to ensure compliance of these systems by the Regulatory deadline. Everything else would be secondary until that principal goal was achieved. Red Zone System compliance was the rallying call and everybody was fully aware of this.</p>



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Distinguishing what “not to do” with a singular level of clarity allowed the organization to galvanize its energy on getting the critical task done in the race to the finish line. Each step forward counted, no stone could be left unturned, and ultimately there could be no excuses.

**Strategy #2: ‘Fast track’ issue resolution**

When dealing with the crunch of an “impossible” project, the means must be found to identify and resolve issues that threaten critical tasks as quickly as possible. Speed and closure are of paramount importance. Delays, even small ones, are ill-afforded in light of the enormity of the challenge being faced. Underlying the identification and resolution dynamic, is the need to manage and track the overall process. Whatever the process developed to manage the issues, it must allow tasks that remain outstanding for too long to be highlighted. Also, the team must have at its disposal the critical resources necessary to ensure that an issue can really be addressed effectively. Having to revisit an issue once thought to be resolved is generally frustrating for a team. Having to do this too often is demoralizing, and can contribute to the derailment of a project.

The Issues Hit List displayed below in Figure 2a is one simple but effective tool for the task. Issues to be resolved are highlighted along with the designated party responsible for that issue. In addition, the effort is made from the outset to distinguish specific closing conditions that need to be met in order to consider the issue resolved. As mentioned before the process underlying the tool is just as important as the Hit List itself. How it is used and who is involved in addressing the issues that arise are critical to its utility.

**INTERNAL HIT LIST**

**All Practice Areas**

ID	PR	?	Area	Type	Date Opened	Description	Lead	Team	Due Date	Status, (Remaining Actions) & (Closing Condition)	% Complete	Date Closed
1	3		Human Capital	Project	4-Oct	Define & Document Field Dynamic's's Recruiting Process Tools	RW	VHC, LHC, KLS	27-Oct	Core documents and tools Completed. (Refinement of Documents for Useability and Presentation) [Final Review & Sign-off]	80%	
2	2		Human Capital	Project	4-Oct	Finalize various Confidential Agreements	RW	VHC, LHW, KLS	2-Nov	Various Agreements drafted. {1. Review by VHC 2. Remaining Edit & Final formatting} [Final Review & Sign-off]	90%	
3	1		Infrastr. Dvlpmt	Project	4-Oct	Complete Suite of Tools used in the Project Leadership Practice	VHC	RW, LHW, KLS	6-Nov	Core tools developed. {1. Detail review & refinement of each tool 2. Final formatting & customization} [Final Review & Signoff]	70%	
4	1		Human Capital	Task	31-Oct	Send Confidential Agreement to Associates	RW	VHC	1-Nov	RW to send Confidential Agreement for KAW's signature.	0%	
5	2		Human Capital	Project	4-Oct	Expand the SME's in Confida's Network	RW	VHC	27-Oct	Three SME's enrolled and confidentiality agreements signed. Conversations being held with two more. { Bio list updated} [ Final Review & Sign-off]	90%	

Going back to the particular case described above, the project managers met with the Managing Director who had the full authority to make 95% of the decisions and resolve most issues. Given the level at which management was involved, actions required to resolve issues were expedited. The Managing Director was accessible to the Project Managers at all times, although there was an established status meeting once a week. The Issues Hit List was a key element in these meetings.



It is important to the success of this strategy that the Issues Hit List or a similar management tool be used in a rigorous and clearly defined manner. For example, in the case above it quickly became clear to all team members that the pathway to having an issue resolved quickly, was to ensure it was placed on the Hit List. In addition, the transparency of the process helps to foster management and team confidence, and if used as recommended, it should be a critical factor in effectively managing the barrage of issues faced in a stressful project. In the case of the financial entity, the openness of the process not only promoted management and team confidence but engendered the confidence of the Regulatory agency as well.

### **Strategy #3: Relentlessly motivate the project team**

While most project managers would not hesitate to acknowledge the importance of this factor, its importance increases tenfold when it relates to an “impossible” project. Remember that by definition, an impossible project is thought to be a losing proposition by almost everyone in the organization. With that context already established, the onus is on the project manager to ensure that everyone is clear about what’s in it for each individual, if the project succeeds. In many cases, being a part of the team dedicated to an “impossible project” has the potential to be career impacting for the full-time project staff. This strategy is really intended to target those team members who have something significant at stake by being on the project.

To have the desired effect, the success criteria must be clearly defined, communicated and referenced on an ongoing basis. In addition, the criteria must be simple: the simpler they are, the more powerful they will be. The test of simplicity is easy enough itself: a sixth-grader should be able to understand what success for the project would look like, with little or no hesitation. Whatever the payoff is, be it a bonus plan, a promotion option, career decisions or anything else relevant to team members, it must be a payoff significant enough to motivate team members to pull together and generate the extra effort that it will take to keep such a challenging project on track. Offering a payoff that fails the meaningful test can have the opposite effect to the one intended i.e. demotivate the team inasmuch as it is viewed as a glaring lack of serious commitment by senior management to both the project and to the team. In essence then, the development of an incentive program that is noteworthy and accomplishes its mission is a significant litmus test that management does not afford to fail.

In the case of the financial entity, having the Red Zone (mission critical) systems compliant by the established deadline was the defined success criterion. A simple bonus plan was established that would provide a pay out to each team member once the goal was met. Simply put, if these mission critical systems were compliant on or before the regulatory deadline of June 30th, 1999, team members would receive approximately two months’ salary (and an implied career boost). Delivery after that date meant no bonus. While the payout was to individuals, meeting the success criterion required a team effort in no uncertain terms. Each person was therefore motivated to do the best possible for the common good.

There are a number of other factors to consider in the effort to motivate team members. While money is a motivating influence, it is obviously not the only one and in many



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cases will fail to accomplish what is needed if offered in isolation. Motivating factors include team members' confidence in the project managers and their decision-making, the perception that tasks and activities are assigned in a responsible and fair manner and the feeling that their opinion and input is valued. While it can be challenging to effectively address these "softer" factors, failure to do so can be costly. To address these areas, companies have used various methods, from "coffee klatches" with senior management to electronic bulletin boards to different surveys. Implementing methods to address these issues comes with a caveat however. There should be forethought and clarity about the steps that will be taken to address concerns raised in these forums. Failure to take effective actions is likely to engender cynicism and resignation among team members in the wake of the anticipation that was created and the risks that team members may have taken in speaking out and taking a stand about underlying issues.

### CONCLUSIONS / IMPLICATIONS

In the project management arena, the strategies outlined here are useful tools in any manager's arsenal. Clearly, factors affecting project scope and success parameters, issue resolution and team motivation require careful consideration in even the most well-timed of projects. All that being said, there are in fact a number of well-established strategies from which a project manager could develop a plan of attack, when faced with a difficult project. However, the characteristics of the "impossible project", with its limited resources, improbable timeframes and exceedingly dubious odds, require a steel-like focus on these three essential strategies that prove the "best bet" for measured success.