

HOW TO SURVIVE

Monster Projects

Some projects are poorly defined, with unclear goals and misaligned strategic priorities.

Innovators are stuck on projects that are destined to crash and burn, never be released, or worse...end up being mediocre. No matter how good we are, it's easy to set ourselves up for failure, because the most critical phase of a project is the point at which we define it.

By Kromatic

DIFFICULTY LEVEL

Monster projects can kill a career. This simple equation will help us understand how difficult it is to survive these projects.

$$6 = 3 \times 4 \div 2$$

3

STAKEHOLDERS

Count the number of people involved. Include any person or organization feeding requirements into the project or who has veto power over some aspect of the project. Remember, stakeholders can be both internal and external to the company, so the number of stakeholders is potentially infinite.

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COMPLEXITY

This scale goes from 1-10. One means the project is absolutely trivial, while ten means it is highly complex, with many moving pieces that require someone with a 150 IQ, a 12-page spreadsheet, and a Gantt chart to even begin to understand it. The sheer size of the project also adds to its complexity.

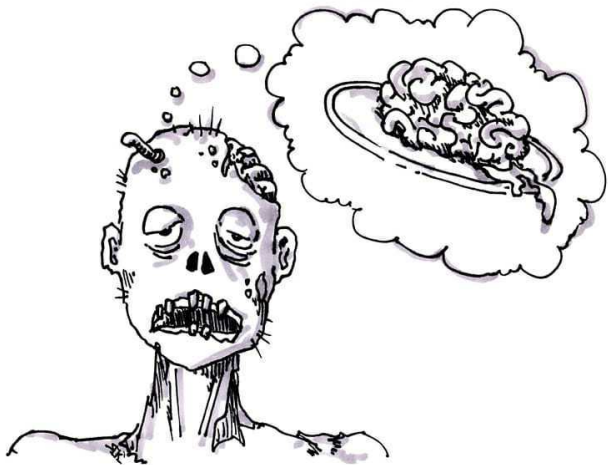
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CLARITY

Also a 1-10 scale. Ten means a crystal-clear vision with actionable and achievable metrics. One means the project is completely baffling to everyone, including the person who proposed it. The clarity score includes having clear goals, objectives, success criteria, a clear path to success, and so forth.

The Zombie

“I’VE TRIED KILLING IT BUT IT KEEPS SUCKING ALL THE BRAINPOWER OUT OF THE TEAM. UNFORTUNATELY, IT’S THE BOSS’ PET PROJECT.”



THE ZOMBIE

This project is the most common of the undead. It's been released, it's failing, but it just won't die.



STAKEHOLDERS

There's only one stakeholder: the boss. The boss' ego counts as a second stakeholder. Our only challenge is convincing the boss and his ego to let us shoot the zombie in the head.

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COMPLEXITY

Zombies are generally simple. They just moan and try to eat brains. As long as we don't let them gang up on us, it's all good.

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CLARITY

The vision is clear. It's just that the vision is a hallucination and the project is failing. Everyone except the boss knows that it has to die.

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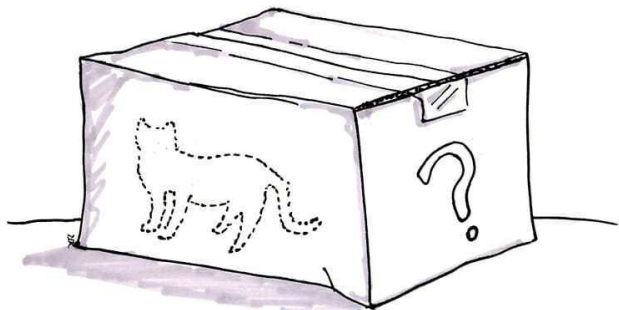


DIFFICULTY

How to Survive: A shot in the head is the only thing that will solve our zombie problem. There is no way to bring it back to life. Don't even try. We just need to provide enough evidence to convince the HiPPO funding the project to kill it. Then we can put it out of its misery.

Schrödinger's Cat

“ONE SECOND IT HAS C-LEVEL SUPPORT, THE NEXT IT DOESN'T. WE HAVE FINISHED THIS PROJECT IN THE AMOUNT OF TIME IT TAKES TO DETERMINE IF IT'S A GO OR NO GO.”



SCHRÖDINGER'S CAT

Due to the effects of stakeholder entanglement, this project is both alive and dead at the same time.



STAKEHOLDERS

There are too many stakeholders and no one can make a decision if the project is going forward or not. Or maybe someone did, but no one was there to observe the decision.

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COMPLEXITY

It's not that complicated. It's mostly just a cat in a box. Are we opening the box or not?

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CLARITY

Success or failure is clear. Either the cat lives or the cat dies. The project is well-defined and goals are set, but not one of the forty stakeholders seems to be able to take the next step and fund the project.

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DIFFICULTY

How to Survive: Get a clear decision on funding, goals, and protection from future shenanigans. Or we could just ignore it. This probably won't damage our career, although it may affect our bonus. Besides, the cat will eventually run out of air and the problem will resolve itself.

The Blob

“I’M NOT SURE WHAT’S BEING ASKED OF ME, BUT IT HAS SOMETHING TO DO WITH ‘INCREASING BRAND EQUITY,’ WHICH SEEMS TO BE CODE FOR, ‘DON’T SCREW THIS UP.’”



THE BLOB

An amorphous project of indeterminate size and shape could encompass everything or nothing.

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STAKEHOLDERS

The project is general enough that everyone thinks they are a stakeholder, and those who don't want to work can decide not to get involved. We only have five who will admit to it for certain.

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COMPLEXITY

Actually not that complex. Really just a single cell organism gone awry.

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CLARITY

Forget stakeholders and complexity, the lack of clarity overrides all other factors. We're still waiting for critical feedback while the board is asking for status updates.

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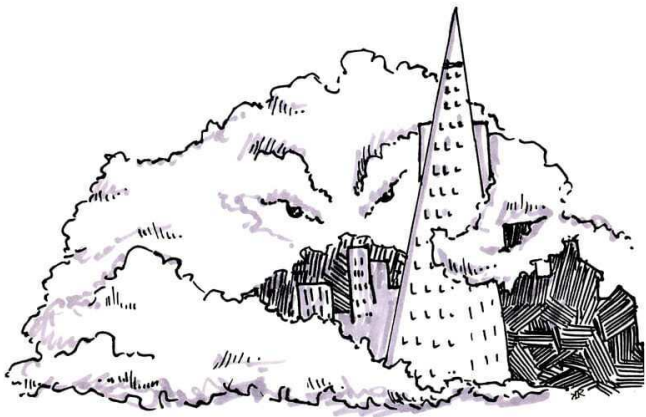
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DIFFICULTY

How to Survive: Define the project ourselves and then get buy-in. Since the project is so ambiguous, it could really be anything. As long as we come up with something brilliant and don't take credit for the idea, our business sponsor will be glad to proclaim, "That's exactly what I meant!"

The Fog

“WHY ARE WE DOING THIS PROJECT?
NO ONE KNOWS, BUT APPARENTLY
IT’S VERY IMPORTANT FOR
‘STRATEGIC REASONS.’”



THE FOG

It's incredibly specific and has precise requirements, but the reasons are shrouded in mystery.



STAKEHOLDERS

There are a few external partners or people from corporate development who can't tell us exactly what we're building or why, but they are absolutely certain we're building it wrong.

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COMPLEXITY

While not intensely complex, there are enough details that it requires a considerable amount of focus to keep things on track.

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CLARITY

While the requirements are clear, the reasons for them are not, and success may depend on things we simply don't know about. We're being completely blocked by an opaque corporate silo.

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DIFFICULTY

How to Survive: Without a clear vision, we're not really in control. Our options are to take charge and define the vision ourselves, flee, or become a diplomat and start reaching across the silos. The more info we can uncover about the objectives, the better our chance of surviving this project.

The Shapeshifter

“I THOUGHT I NAILED THIS PROJECT LAST WEEK, BUT AFTER THAT PROGRESS REVIEW, I’M MORE CONFUSED THAN EVER.”



THE SHAPESHIFTER

Every meeting results in moving goal posts, changing visions, and revising success criteria.



STAKEHOLDERS

The number of stakeholders is not the problem here. The problem is the fact that these stakeholders change their minds every week!

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COMPLEXITY

This project changes form every time it comes into contact with a human. It could be only marginally complex, but with morphing goals, managing and prioritizing is nearly impossible.

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CLARITY

We thought we had clear goals and now we don't. We also know that next week we'll surely get new goals. It's not quite as bad as The Fog, but it's still pretty confusing.

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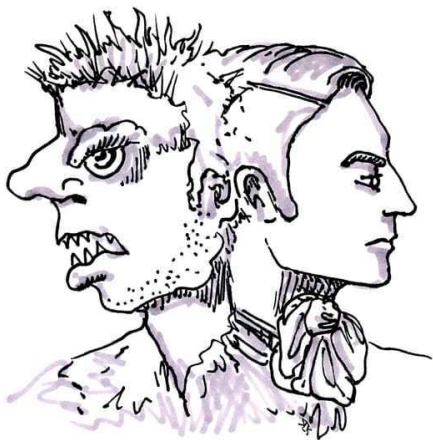


DIFFICULTY

How to Survive: Cancel all the meetings! No more contact with humans for this project. Having good air support from a single corporate sponsor who sticks to their decision is key.

Dr. Jekyll & Mr. Hyde

“DEPENDING ON WHO SHOWS UP TO MEETINGS, THIS PROJECT IS EITHER EASY OR UTTERLY TERRIFYING.”



It could be a simple project, but it overlaps business units, and those leaders have opposing goals.



STAKEHOLDERS

The split personality of this project is the result of stakeholders with opposing interests. Although we have many stakeholders, the number itself is manageable. If only we could get them to agree.

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COMPLEXITY

The project itself could be simple; the complexity results from political tensions, mixed messages, and opposing interests.

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CLARITY

It is clear what each stakeholder wants, but it is not clear how we will complete the project in a way that makes them all happy. Taken together, the goals are contradictory at best.

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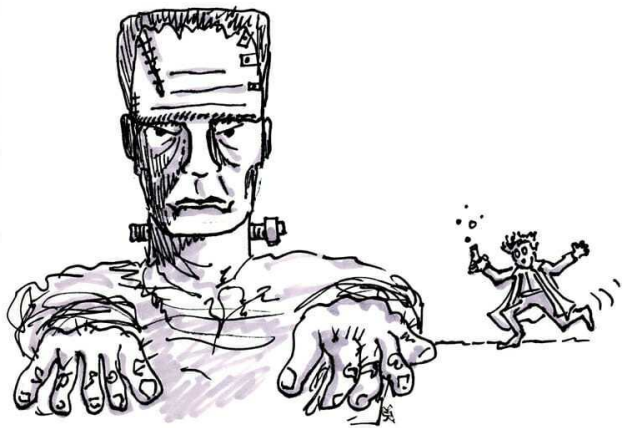


DIFFICULTY

How to Survive: Find someone we don't like and convince them to claim the project. Alternatively, accept that we cannot satisfy everyone and try to work with one sponsor that can pull rank and get final say. Oh, and get that in writing, just in case.

Frankenstein's Monster

"NONE OF THESE PARTS FIT TOGETHER AND NOBODY SEEMS TO WANT THEM. SO I GUESS I'LL JUST BOLT THIS EXTRA PIECE ON HERE."



FRANKENSTEIN'S MONSTER

There are too many stakeholders with no one agreeing on who this project is actually for.



STAKEHOLDERS

So, so, so many stakeholders. So many vested interests. Every salesperson has a giant client with special requests that must be fulfilled.

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COMPLEXITY

So so many feature requests. Each one as important as the last one. This complexity is making the project ugly, but every stakeholder is calling it a beauty!

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CLARITY

Sure there is clarity. It is clear what everyone wants, and it's a lot of stuff. It is also clear that everyone is crazy.

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DIFFICULTY

How to Survive: Run screaming. Or get a high-ranking stakeholder to be the “decider” and provide air support to shield us from some of those pesky stakeholders and define a customer segment to focus on.

The Mummy

“THIS PROJECT IS SO TIED UP IN RED TAPE THAT BY THE TIME THE BUREAUCRACY IS UNRAVELED, I WILL HAVE AGED A THOUSAND YEARS.”



THE MUMMY

Regulatory compliance is critical for this project; the biggest risk is the looming threat of being sued.



STAKEHOLDERS

We have to deal with multiple actors within the various regulatory agencies. Compliance and/or procurement is a stakeholder, and those are real tough customers with almost no flexibility!

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COMPLEXITY

The red tape is so complex that we may need to add unnecessary features just to comply. We won't hit our release date and every change requires a new approval process.

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CLARITY

The project's goals are fairly clear. We know exactly what we're trying to accomplish, but the red tape is still obscuring some key requirements. Do we need a TPS report? Or a 27B-6?

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DIFFICULTY

How to Survive: Make the regulators partners or find a way to hack the system. Work with Legal and Compliance to define a sandbox where pushing boundaries and running tests won't damage the brand or open up the company to litigation.



The Vampire

“THIS PROJECT WILL NEVER BE RELEASED. IT REFUSES TO SEE THE LIGHT OF DAY, AND IT IS SUCKING THE LIFE OUT OF MY CAREER.”



THE VAMPIRE

This project is protected by a senior stakeholder who can't look in the mirror and see there's nothing there.



STAKEHOLDERS

There's just one stakeholder, but they are a very powerful stakeholder with at least 55 minions devoted to their vision.

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COMPLEXITY

These projects are deceptively elaborate; there's always some excuse for why more development is needed: "It's a four-sided market and we can't release until we have feature sets for all sides."

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CLARITY

The vision is clear, but it's never-ending and always one step beyond our reach.

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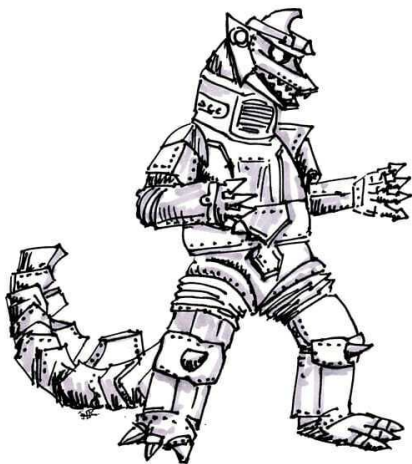


DIFFICULTY

How to Survive: Finance is a key ally here because they hate projects that bust the budget with no ROI in sight. Proposing simple tests to get a minimal project out the door within budget will solve the problem by letting sunlight do its work. And sunlight is the best disinfectant for bad ideas!

MechaGodzilla

“THIS PROJECT IS SO BIG AND COMPLEX, I CAN’T DECIDE IF I SHOULD LAUGH, CRY, OR JUST RUN BEFORE IT STEPS ON ME.”



MECHAGODZILLA

This project is not deliberately out to get us. On the down side, it is very, very, very hard to kill.



STAKEHOLDERS

Big, nasty, and a lot of people are concerned about the impact of this project. Everyone is pouring resources in, and everyone has an opinion.

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COMPLEXITY

The most complex of all projects. It's just too many moving pieces of technology that are a little bit beyond everyone's grasp.

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CLARITY

Almost too clear. We can see it from 100 miles away!

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DIFFICULTY

How to Survive: To kill it, we need to find its weak spot (Has a customer been stepped on? Can we surface this story?). Or we can simplify with frank conversations about what's important so this doesn't go rampaging all over our customers.