

The Perfect Project

Bart Flos

**THE
PERFECT
PROJECT**

**Why People Are
Key To Success**



Why People Are Key To Success

The Perfect Project

Why People Are Key To Success

The Perfect Project

BART FLOS

**THE
PERFECT
PROJECT**

***Why People Are
Key to Success***



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

The Perfect Project

As addenda to 'De mens als grens':

Addendum I – Het begin van het einde: onwetendheid

Addendum II – De frontale confrontatie: klimaatverandering

Addendum III – Het grote probleem: overconsumptie

Addendum IV – Het laatste taboe: ineenstorting

As addenda to 'Our Inner Limits':

Addendum V – The Beginning of The End: Ignorance

Addendum VI – De Frontal Confrontation: Climate Change

Addendum VII – The Big Problem: Overconsumption

Addendum VIII – The Final Taboo: Collapse

Addendum IX – BONUS – The Next Step: Collapse Awareness

Addendum X – BONUS – The Last Resort: Collapse Acceptance

Addendum XI – BONUS – The Tough Choice: Collapse Resilience

If something can go wrong, it will go wrong.

Murphy's law

First edition August 2024 (V_8)

Original Dutch title: *Het perfecte project – De mens als sleutel tot succes*

Publisher BlijvendBeklijven Boeken

Broederwal 81

5708 ZT Helmond

www.blijvendbeklijven.nl

info@blijvendbeklijven.nl

www.hetperfecteproject.nl (Dutch version)

Author, translation, editing and correction: Bart Flos (www.bartflosveranderadvies.nl)

Translation consultant: Benjamin Roberts (www.benjaminbroberts.com)

Logistics and administration: BlijvendBeklijven Boeken (www.blijvendbeklijven.nl)

ISBN: 9789461260840 (Dutch version)

NUR 800

© Bart Flos 2014/2024

No part of this information may be reproduced and/or made public without the express written permission of the author. Although this book has been compiled with great care, neither the author nor any of the other parties involved accepts any liability for damage caused by any errors and/or imperfections in this book.

TABLE OF CONTENTS

ABOUT THIS BOOK 11

Why are we monkeying around all the time?	12
James Bond doesn't exist	14
Unmask your botched up project	17
Do you ever go shopping?	19

INTRODUCTION 21

Listening to Mr. Murphy	21
Project botch-ups for professionals	23
The Seven-Tiered Hour Glass	29

CHAPTER 1

Don't rush into your project 47

About the energy management of a project	47
The Project Match Test	49
The PIVOT-lists	58

PIVOT-lists by function of a thermometer	72
How do you unlearn a salesman's tricks?	74
On steering with bonuses	78

CHAPTER 2

Dare to stop when it goes haywire 81

Soldering until the cows come home	81
The visible project versus the intangible product	84
The strength and weakness of a project team	86
Causes of non-intervention	88
The S.T.O.P.-Principle	90
The Status Totalus	92
The frontal confrontation with information	100
On whistleblowers and scapegoats	103
The Anti-Boch-Up Quadrant	106

CHAPTER 3

Get to the root of your problems 113

Project distinctiveness	113
The secondary fire triangle	117
The Problem Analysis Checklist	119

The function of rubber stamp issues	125
Think-Tanking with Brainpower	127

CHAPTER 4

Act like an entrepreneur 135

When managers act weird, give them weird back	135
On the difference between a process and a project	138
Between organizational maturity and entrepreneurship	144
How to differentiate organizational maturity	149
The Project Botch-Up Test	159
The Seven Consultation Questions	164

CHAPTER 5

Evaluate, share and celebrate 173

About the definition of project success	173
All success is relative	177
Projects have a short-term memory	181
Spread the word!	184
The Success Analysis Checklist	185

CHAPTER 6

Perfectionize your project 191

The Project Cycle of Success v. the Project Fail Trail 191

Take right and matters into your own hands 193

When is your project perfect? 195

EPILOGUE 199

The Chunnel Project 199

Inviting Mr. Murphy 202

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 without 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 when 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 where 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 without 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 doing 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

The Perfect Project

[...]

Why People Are Key To Success

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



W H Y P E O P L E A R E K E Y T O S U C C E S S