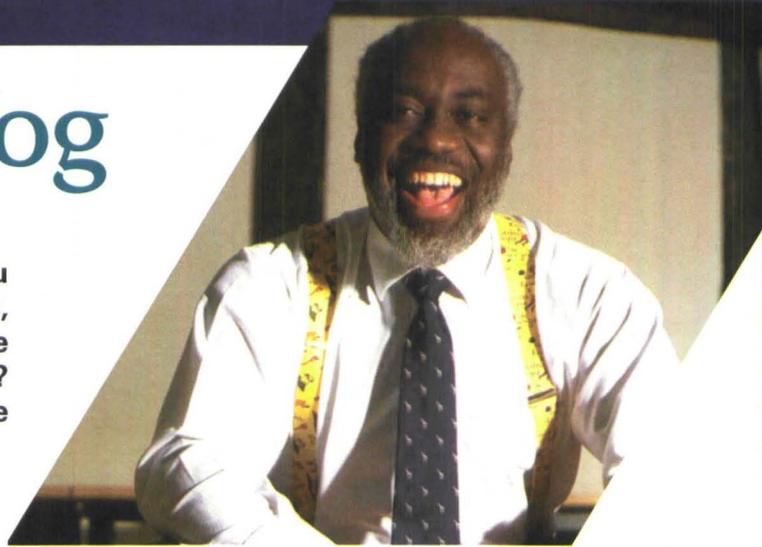


Clearing the fog

Shame on you as a project manager if you haven't heard of Eddie Obeng's 'foggy' projects, you could be in one without realizing it! On the other hand what to do if you find yourself in one? Obeng says you need to focus, and then move forward one-step-at-a-time!



WEBACTIVE See diagrams full size www.pmtoday.co.uk

Your eyes feel full of grit. And so they should. Three hours sleep on a Thursday night after a tough week isn't enough for anybody – not even you. Three hours sleep. Four hours spent worrying. It started with, 'Something must be done about our level of innovation. And it must be done urgently. We are not growing as fast as the market place. You are going to deliver and I need a detailed plan and business case by Monday.' Fatal words, uttered by your VP: you respond, demanding a clearer brief. His response, 'If you can't deliver can you suggest someone else who can?' Stalemate. Where to start? Who to include? What to do? How to estimate the costs? How to scope it? How even, to write a business case? Aargh! If only you had a better brief. You've tried to create a Gantt chart and got stuck. You don't have enough information for a critical path analysis and you definitely can't do any present value calculations.

When your organisation asks you to deliver a project different from any that have been done in the organisation before, a project where the goals are unclear and how to achieve them is unclear (and often no one even understands why it needs to be done) you will find your self walking through what I call a thick FOG. These days 'Foggy projects' (as opposed to Painting-by-numbers projects) are more and more common (along with the other two types, Quests and Movies!). Foggy projects are hard to get a handle on and they engage your emotions. So does that mean that if you end up leading a Foggy project you are doomed?

No. I believe not.

Today, as a project leader, you need to have the skills and capabilities to manage all change, however open and uncertain. You need to use different tools and techniques from the ones you learnt on your MBA or Prince II course. You need techniques and tools invented specifically for the New World.

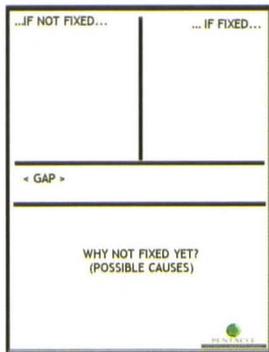
So you don't know what the project is? So

you can't plan it? No problem! Working on your own you could create a Bubble Diagram™ (See *All Change!* FT publishing). But if you are working with others I would recommend you go for a Gap Analysis™ – not as precise as a bubble diagram – but it allows everyone, all your stakeholders, to become emotionally engaged and share the ownership of both the problem and the solution. The most powerful way to use these tools is in combination with another of my inventions, Sticky Steps™.

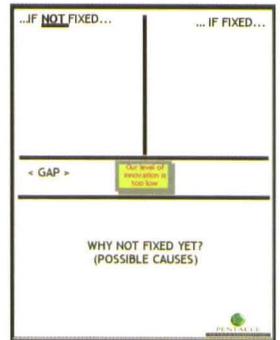
In Foggy project situations however it's very rare that the first problem people settle on is the actual problem they face.

You've been losing sleep because: 'Something must be done about our low level of innovation' And that is how you start a Gap Analysis™. There is obviously a difference, a gap between the current state of affairs and the desired state of affairs. How would you describe this gap? See if you can find a sentence to describe it. Involve other people in the discussion. You'll probably discover that there are three or four sentences which describe the gap between the current state and the desired state. Work on them one at a time. In this case you could start with the sentence you got straight from your VP. 'Our levels of innovation are too low' and 'We are not growing as fast as the market place.'

You need a flip chart and a wedge of Post-it notes. Lay out your flip chart as I've drawn it on the right:



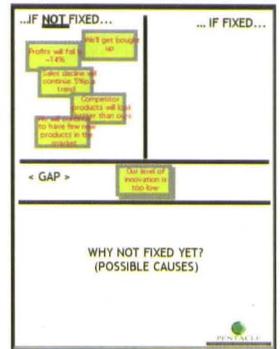
Now choose your sentence. This is your gap. This gap is the first thing you write down on a Post-it. Stick it slap-bang in the middle of your flip chart workspace.



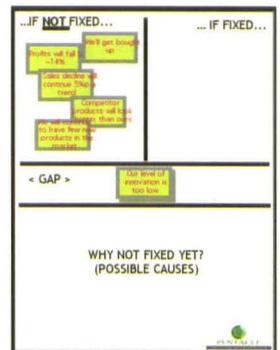
Now you've got to work out if the gap is worth closing.

Workshop this. Hand out the pads of Post-its. The first question you and your group must answer is, 'What will happen IF this gap is NOT FIXED?' Ask each participant to write out a Post-it each with their strongest view. Every one gets the same number of 'votes' (two/three Post-its if your group consists of less than ten people) Encourage them to quantify the effects if possible – cost overall, cost per year etc.

Gather up the Post-its and group them on the flip chart. Arrange the groups so that they tell a story as you read them out loud going upward and away from the gap. 'This is our gap. If we don't fix it



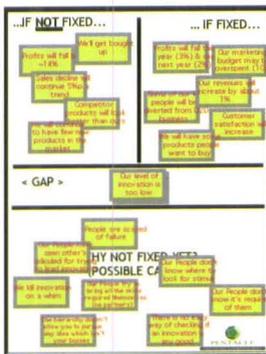
Now ask them to write a Post-it each about what they anticipate will happen if the Gap is closed, IF FIXED and repeat the step above.



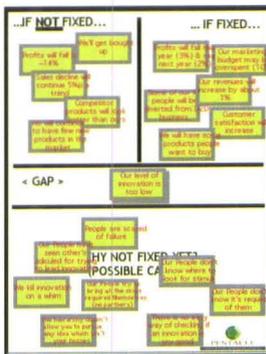
Some of the Post-its will have comments that are the opposite of the ones on what happens if it's not fixed. That's fine but encourage the participants to think more widely, and also to quantify the effects wherever possible.

Now a quick pause for reflection. You have the full 'do nothing' story as well as the benefits/ outcomes story. In other words you have the basis of your business case.

In Foggy project situations however it's very rare that the first problem people settle on is the actual problem they face. To try to get a bit deeper below the surface we return to the Gap but this time we try to work out why the gap actually exists - 'Why hasn't the gap been fixed yet?' This is achieved using Post-its and 'voting' as before.



Again, cluster the results by similar comments and then try to group them so that they tell a story as you read them from the bottom up.



So you now have a few clusters of things which are stopping the gap from being closed. I call these cluster topics, 'anchors'. All these issues need to be included in the scope of the project if it is to succeed.

In addition, you will discover that the anchors contain the names or departments of many of the people who are likely to be key stakeholders.

So now we have some clues about 'Where to start? Who to include? How to scope it? How even, to write a business case?'

Making progress through the Fog - One 'sticky step' at a time

In a Foggy project starting is more important than making absolutely sure you know where to start and everything about the project before you start. But I always recommend that to manage the risk and also improve the learning and chances of success that you establish a project 'drumbeat'. This drumbeat is the frequency with which you will re-plan and review to check that you are getting closer to a solution.

So let's plan how we are going to eliminate one of the cluster anchors we've identified.

For this we use Sticky Steps™. The Sticky Steps™ process works like planning in reverse. We pretend we've succeeded with the project and then we brainstorm how we succeeded in a strict format around a simple sentence. In order to have.... we must have....

So starting with the cluster which said, 'There is no easy way of checking if an innovation is any good,' we re-phrase that as its 'opposite', as a goal. Perhaps as 'Created an easy way of checking if an innovation is any good'.

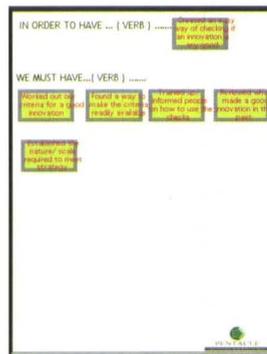
Sticky Steps™ is a structured brainstorm in which you simply dream up endings for a sentence. Read the sentence out loud.



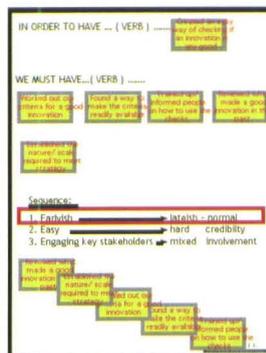
Fill in the 'What?' using one of your cluster anchors.



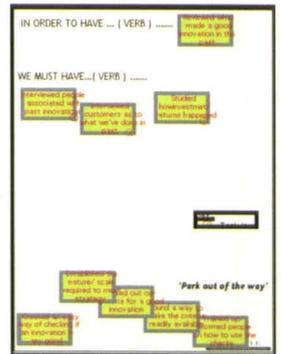
So let's just complete the sentence - no wild guesses which don't fit the sentence are allowed. Our problem now becomes that now we have five more Foggyish things to deal with. No problem, we'll just repeat the process again.



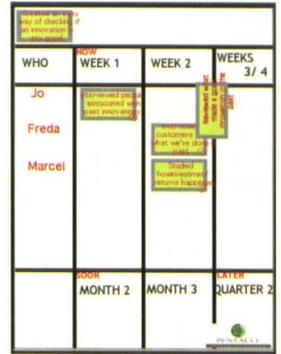
Which sticky to start with? Well it depends. A time line is normal but if you need to show progress or build credibility start on something easy. If you need to get attention from a stakeholder choose something they have to participate in.



As we have repeated the process, tasks - things we clearly know how to do - start to fall out. If they don't, just repeat the process and break the statement down further.



The clear, non-Foggy tasks can be given as accountabilities to the appropriate stakeholder.



So now we have an estimate of how long the sub-project is going to take. Of course we'll review this in line with our 'drumbeat'.



Finally, we can estimate the actual amount of work each task or sticky is likely to require. From that we can estimate the level of resource required.



Your sticky step plan will give you an idea of 'What to do?' and also a stab at 'How to estimate the costs?'

So there we have it, a three month long sub-project, involving four people costing 29 person days. All you now have to do is finish off the Sticky Step™ plan to work out how long the whole thing is going to take and how much resource it's going to consume. With that and your IF FIXED/ IF NOT FIXED I can see a business case coming on strongly. Now remind me, why were you losing sleep?

If you want to learn more about focusing and planning projects, Perfect Projects, published by Pentacle Works is out in August. Alternatively, you can read All Change! the Project Leader's Secret Handbook.

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