

Mind the Beasties:

Seven Common Monsters that Will Swallow Up Your Projects and Programs, and How to Deal With Them

Does this sound familiar?

Let's recall again why we are taking this journey.

Here is the way things have been working for several decades now.

Organizations needing to improve the speed and costs of delivering their products and services turn to project, portfolio and program management (PPFM) for help. So they should. There is a broad consensus that such practices offer real benefits in the form of cost reductions (eliminating redundancies, choosing the most cost-effective solutions, etc.) and in competitive advantages (speed to market and improved satisfaction of customer demands).



After many months of honest effort entwined with wrangling and dissension, and after many hundreds of thousands (if not millions) of dollars have been spent with apparently no effect, the initiative slowly fades into obscurity. Everybody breathes a sigh of relief as they slide back to the old habits, except perhaps for the former staff of the PPFMO - and even they may be sufficiently battle-scarred that they welcome the time-out or lay-off. Perhaps the external pressures have diminished so that the company has enough resources to be able to limp along despite its inadequacies, or perhaps things continue their slow downward spiral. But eventually the stakeholders make themselves heard again, executives are pressured to produce results, and once again the organization decides "Hey, let's start a PPFMO!"

What will be different this time? This time they turn to you to make it go right. Congratulations - or something.

And this time they'll have selected someone who is going to defeat the monsters in their path not by charging straight at them, which hasn't worked too well in the past, but by recognizing them.

Dragons have quite a bit of inertia. They can burn you to a crisp when they want to, and when they are annoyed that is just what they want to do. Otherwise, they would rather be snoozing comfortably. Using the Let Simmer system, you can minimize the amount of disturbance you create. If you cannot bypassing them altogether, you can make such a very small fuss and provide so much that is useful that the dragon will just open an eye as you pass, or may even take you on as a helper. In fact, they may like you so much that they will not let you go. From where we stand today, that sounds like a good problem to have.

So let's see if we can **help you escape the same old traps?**

Change is always hard

Regardless of how much sense something makes to you, it can't be all that obvious to the rest of the organization or they would have done it by themselves already. A lot of books (including the project management classics) emphasize the need for top-level support in making a change happen, but the root of success goes deeper than that. Very few leaders are successful in transforming their organizations by ordering it so, or through the power of persuasive speeches, or even through collective involvement. Most people prefer things to remain stable in their lives and work. Organizations develop processes that can be repeated rather than being re-invented daily - this is, indeed, the very concept of "bureaucracy", and it intentionally impedes changing what appears to be a successful trajectory at the whim of one or two zealots who believe they have a better idea. Effective organizational change requires one simple thing: the action must be driven by a compelling reason that is obvious to everyone involved.

Seven causes of failure

There are many reasons why an initiative can fail. Several keep popping up, not just in published case studies, but in dozens of organizations we've worked with. All them stem from the same root cause: the organization does not embrace the need for change as enthusiastically as the PPFMO. They can be grouped roughly into seven general areas:



1. **Executives are not promoting the seriousness of the issues.** The PPFMO cannot be the driver of a conversation about the "big threat". It is a minor staff appendage that is too obviously concerned with its process mania that does not seem to be relevant to the rest of the organization. The leaders of the PPFMO initiative must expend every nickel of political capital, if necessary, to get the organization's true leaders to articulate the problem that the PPFMO is intended to solve as a major threat to the organization. If the root problem is not

credible as a threat to the organization's very existence, it should at least be something that will have a heavy impact on something the organization does value, whether that be jobs, funding or elements of the mission.

2. **Undermining Authority.** Whenever dealing with change it is wise to ask "who benefits?" Change is seldom in the interest of key people. The simple fact is that the organization rewards precisely the behavior that successful managers are exhibiting today. The people running the organization got to their positions because they are a good fit for the culture just the way it is. You can wave best-practice documents all you want, and you can lecture until you are blue in the face, but you are not going to change the personalities, ethics or ambitions of the leadership. Instead, you must tailor any shift in the decision-making process to recognize the current authority of the leadership, rather than being seen as a means of undermining it.





3. **Fear of Transparency.** In many organizations with weak processes, managers make decisions in secrecy even though there are no secrets to protect. Why?

- They don't trust their own competence, so they don't want anyone knowing what they decided or why. Hopefully these are the exception, or the organization is in really deep trouble.
- Everything they do is political: one-on-one, behind closed doors, behind backs. This is quite common in larger organizations - commercial just as much as public-sector.

These types of concerns are difficult to overcome because they go to the heart of the organization's culture. For these managers, emphasize that the point is to record their decisions; it does not require recording the processes of making the decisions. But the rest of the organization cannot carry out the leaders' wishes if nobody knows what they are.

4. **Fear of Accountability.** Managers may not want to be held accountable for their decisions and/or for the work that they manage. This is by far the most common reason. In truth, very few people anywhere desire such accountability if they can get by without it. The big question for the PPFMO Director is whether this reflects the overall corporate culture. The PPFMO simply does not have the clout to try to force



accountability onto a managerial structure that rejects it. However, in any complex organization, there are cross-group dependencies that do need to be honored, whether it is customer deliveries or hand-offs between functional areas; it is usually possible to gain agreement on monitoring those events. Once this falls into place, the rest tends to follow.



5. **Fear of Rigidity.** Organizations often resist instituting governance processes that they fear will be too rigid, diverting organizational resources to achieve process compliance instead of working on timely delivery of quality solutions. In addition to the resource burden, managers fear a tedious change management process that prevents adaptation to changing circumstances. Those who have been through a by-the-book implementation have every reason to hold this concern! Successful implementations must emphasize the amount of tailoring that is possible to reduce the process burden, the existence of a bypass option with a signed waiver, and the endorsement of agility. It won't be enough just to say these things: people will draw their own conclusions from what happens with the first two or three initiatives that are required to undergo the process.

6. **Lack of Supporting Processes.** Delivery of goods and services requires support from organizational elements outside the project team, such as finance, contracting and facilities. All too often, those groups only know one way for doing things: the one that they have used in the past. They also have pocket veto power, by simply failing to take action, or worse, by performing their tasks incompetently. The PPFMO must work with these groups from the outset to understand them and take advantage of whatever processes are working; over time, the PPFMO effort can be a catalyst for improvements in those support areas as well.



7. **Maturity Model Dogma.** Many professional associations have developed maturity models to portray ascension through progressive levels of competence. Consultancies are of course happy to provide long-term support in trying to climb up the maturity ladder. The problem is that reality does not operate in such a convenient linear fashion. Nor is there any inherent value in achieving the pinnacle of maturity. Valuable processes are those that help the business to deliver its services more effectively. All others are just overhead burdens. The good news is that all of these processes are intertwined, and over time the impracticality of following some processes and not others will become clear to everyone. At that point the organization will accept additional process constraints in order to improve those processes that have shown their benefit. The trick is to make sure that the set of processes selected in the early rounds do indeed create readily-observable benefits with the least possible amount of disruption, so that the overall effort gains credibility and the good-will needed for acceptance of further refinements.

Taming the Beasties

In an ideal situation, we would recognize these risks and plan a course that would avoid them altogether. But the situation seldom is ideal - in fact, if it were, there would probably not be a need for a new PPFMO initiative in the first place. Most likely, some vulnerabilities in the organizational culture has led us to this point, and that culture encourages reactivity rather than conscious decisions. The odds are that the journey will already be underway before the captains trouble themselves about details like a map.

Whether you are going to try to avoid these monsters altogether, or just be prepared when you do encounter them, the approach is the same: take steps that are small enough to avoid spooking the dragons, but large enough to keep you moving towards the ultimate direction.

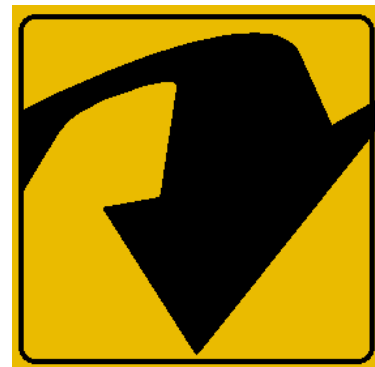
Sounds pretty mystical, right? Let's look at some examples of how to use this in practice.

- A large commercial organization was very late and very far over-budget on a major business initiative. The company's top executives had made public commitments to achieve the project by a certain date that had already passed. A PPFMO had already been disbanded; now another was stood up.



- **Symptoms:** The solution had become impossibly complex, the underlying platform was ill-suited to the task, senior executives kept having good ideas that were tasked directly down to the vendor [*transparency*], and different project teams were working on conflicting approaches. Staff members had good reason to believe that raising issues would be viewed as *undermining authority*. The PPFMO had insisted on Change Proposals in the past [*maturity model dogma*], but that idea faded away as staff members considered themselves too busy to do the analysis [*fear of rigidity*], managers feared to suggest that problems might exist and executives refused to participate [*fear of accountability*]. Meanwhile time continued to tick on.

- **Solution:** Analysts warned of a significant impact on the company's share price if the initiative were delayed yet again [*compelling reason to change*]. The PPFMO dropped its insistence on completing Change Proposal templates [*dogma*]. It developed a clear position paper explaining why the project was at a point of no return and what the options were. This business document was easier to grasp for layers of managers and executives already focused by the potential loss of lucrative stock options. The guidance was very simple: if it isn't needed for the launch, stop doing it! Formal status reports became appendices to a more powerful demand for clear commitments by managers: are you going to deliver by the date you are now saying [*transparency, accountability*]? A formal contract management process with the primary vendors replaced the sponsor's ad-hoc directives and related initiatives (such as the related training effort) were included in regular coordination meetings [*supporting processes*].



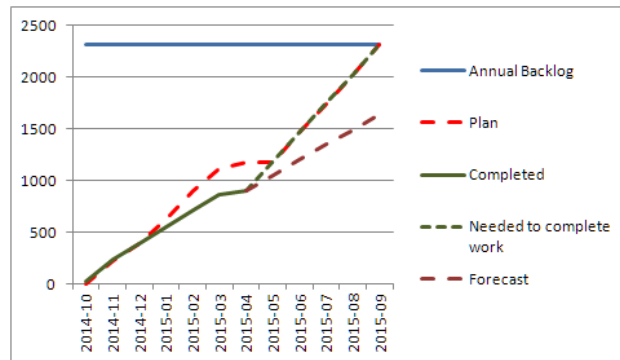
- **Outcome:** Effective governance is not an all-powerful magic bullet. By launch day, the company had spent nearly as much in recovering the project as it had intended to make in the first 3 years of operation, and the experience was not healthy for everyone's career. But thanks to implementing the most important aspects in a way that the company could accept, the initiative did launch on the announced date, with the product fully operational and mollified investors leaving their capital in the company so that it could (and did) refine the offering in a more orderly manner over time.

- At the other end of the complexity spectrum, an organization operated a relatively small but important program responsible for maintenance of some significant assets. With the program in a stable maintenance mode, executive attention focused on problems elsewhere, but this led to the program staff also losing interest.



- **Symptoms:** The program staff had abdicated its work completely: the supporting contractors budgeted, planned, and managed their own work. Records were stored on personal computers rather than in the agency's shared files, and the program maintained no meaningful metrics [*transparency*]. Questions from senior managers received multiple answers, all of them wrong, sometimes intentionally [*accountability*]. Costs escalated while actual work done slowed to a crawl. Customers did not know how to get things done through the PPFMO, which had no plans or process guides because they didn't want to commit to following them [*fear of rigidity*]. Mostly, they were afraid of their own documents because the few documents they did produce were blindly recycled from much larger programs [*maturity model dogma*]. Managers further up the line were concerned, but strong corrective action was inconsistent with the corporate culture [*lack of compelling reason to change*].

- **Solution:** The PPFMO received an interim contract, with re-competition to follow. [introducing a *compelling reason*]. Seeking to relieve the higher-level managers' frustrations, the PPFMO contractor began documenting the answers it provided and loading the data into the client's SharePoint site [*restoring transparency*]. Soon, missing and bottlenecked actions became clear. The PPFMO deflected pressure to build a detailed Microsoft Project schedule and build formal plans before taking further action [fending off *dogma*], instead using Agile month-to-month plans [*avoiding rigidity*] to get the gaps filled and bottlenecks opened [*instituting accountability*]. The PPFMO added critical provisions allowing for planning and oversight as well as flexibility in supporting contracts [*better supporting processes*].



- **Outcome:** Within 4 months, the PPFMO had gone from a 30% oversight rate to having solid documentation and repair plans for 75% of the assets. Senior managers had a simple status dashboard they could use to understand the true status of the program. While many key issues and actions remained unresolved, they were at least recorded and tracked. In short, the program had turned the corner and was positioned to sustain reasonable standards of effectiveness.

Taming the beasts in your world



It's easy to become disillusioned about your ability to make meaningful change in a strong, long-standing culture. The dragons represent root causes; they are "hot buttons" that create an instant defensive reaction if they are pressed. So try not to press them if it can be helped! Even so, the two cases above show that significant organizational culture issues can be overcome, bit by bit, once you recognize the root causes and take actions that simultaneously recognize, avoid and bypass those buttons, taking advantage of such opportunities as the culture provides.

Here are some possible responses to help you get past the seven beasts that may be in your path. Any one of them can prevent your PPFMO from succeeding.

Change Blockers	Workarounds
No compelling reason to change	Before suggesting to executives that they aren't providing enough support, develop evidence of ways in which the organization does not appear to be taking their initial pronouncements seriously. Work with them to get a strong, simple re-statement of the problem, and set up a periodic review meetings to make sure the lower managers are carrying out their response actions.
Undermining Authority	When explaining any proposed governance process with the current decision-makers, take care to explain their role in the process, showing how they will continue to have decision authority.
Fear of Transparency	Emphasize that people can only carry out decisions if they know what has been decided on. Give in on the actual amount of information that is released; for instance, knowing how or when it was decided is a best practice but not necessary.
Fear of Accountability	Gain agreement on the points at which accountability - that is, delivering on commitments - is necessary. Focus at first on timeliness of handoffs; don't worry about detailed task tracking until the big things are taken care of.
Fear of Rigidity	Explain how processes can be tailored and even waived where needed. Lead off with simple efforts and simple compliance requirements.
Lack of Supporting Processes	Work with the proponents to tweak their processes, rather than fighting a losing battle to seek wholesale changes. Meanwhile, use approaches that make best use of whatever processes the organization does have in place.
Maturity Model Dogma	Avoid trying to achieve a target maturity level, or to build out a complete level. Pick the most feasible and effort-efficient elements of the model and implement those.

Where can you turn for help?

We have the greatest respect for the many consulting companies that offer project, portfolio and program management practices. Armed with the blocker list provided in this paper, you may be able to engage with them to make sure that your approaches recognize and deal with those issues. And they can provide the staff needed to augment yours through the transition.

Still, let's recognize that a certain amount of self-interest is involved when you are discussing long-term support requirements with any vendor.

To make sure that we do not fall into that trap too, Decision Integration LLC has chosen a service approach that emphasizes very short-term interactions on specific matters. We don't want to displace anyone; we want to help make the situation better for all concerned, and then move on. Our approach is to provide custom half-day or full-day consultation sessions to address specific issues and potential solutions, to help build out specific solutions, and to conduct staff orientation and support in implementing your solutions.

Your investment in our advice is minimal - most organizations will be able to use a simple corporate credit card to secure an issue-specific planning or strategy session. If you like it, you can buy another. You can find our session [offerings and costs](#) on our web site, <http://www.DecisionIntegration.com>.

About the Author



Dr. Douglas Brown has a wide range of experience in many settings, including serving as an Army officer, a senior Federal manager and a management consultant in both commercial and government settings. He received his doctorate in Public Policy Analysis from The American University in Washington DC. He holds certifications as a Program Management Professional (PgMP) and Project Management Professional (PMP) from the Project Management Institute; a Certified Enterprise Architect from the Open Group; and a DAWIA Program Manager Level III and as a Lean Six Sigma Black Belt from the Department of Defense. Aside from consulting work, he presently authors Pulse postings on Linked-In and the blog "[Business and IT Decisions](#)" and is the author of the forthcoming book "To Succeed, Let Simmer: How To Make Project, Portfolio or Program Management Stick to Your Organization".

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