

Surviving in the matrix

by Geof Cox

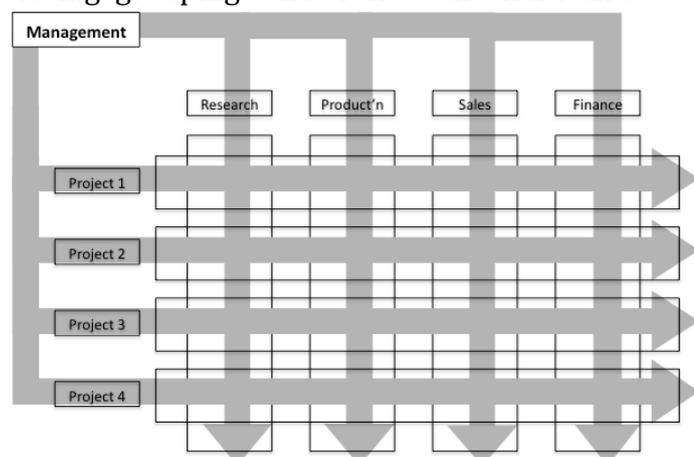
People who work in a matrix structure will be only too well aware of some of the frustrations:

- “It’s impossible to get any work done around here. There is always someone who has an interest even in the smallest of decisions.”
- “I don’t know what they do or how to get them involved.”
- “I have one boss who says I should focus on ‘X’ and another who says focus on ‘Y’.”
- “No-one knows who is responsible any more.”
- “How do I get things done when all of my team reports to a different manager?”
- “I have the responsibility for the project completion but I don’t control any of the resources.”
- “How do I know if something is being done right when the person doing the job is in a different country and doesn’t even work for our company?”
- “The project team is located on 3 different continents and time zones, so that there is no time when we are all in our offices at the same time. Yet efficient communication is the key to our success. How do you make that work?”

Given these difficulties, it is hard to accept that a matrix organisation is worth retaining. Most people I talk to in the matrix would agree. In fact, after being widely embraced in the 1970s and 1980s, matrix structures did decline in popularity and more hierarchical structures returned for their ease of communication and simplicity. But the matrix is now back, along with its sister structure, the project based organisation. It is back as it reflects the complexity of the business environment which demands that organisations innovate faster and leverage their resources more effectively.

The matrix does work, if well structured and managed. It can improve the quality and speed of business decisions. It does this by focusing cross-functional expertise in responsive, customer facing groupings that reflect the fluid and complex environment in which the organisation operates.

It is the dual (and multiple) reporting relationship that most often leads to the frustrations and confusions voiced by those caught up in the matrix. They make the comments like those above, and cry out for the simplicity and clarity of the hierarchy. The frustrations felt



are even greater where people have not been adequately trained in working in the matrix, or if the matrix has been implemented badly. If those managing do not understand how to get results in the structure, there is little hope for the rank and file workers. Too often managers waste their energy in a fight for overall control in a structure where no overall control is deliberate:

Case in point: in the previous heyday of the matrix, I was consulting to a company in Switzerland. They were trying to implement a matrix structure under orders from their US parent. It took the senior executives nearly 18 months to stop fighting amongst themselves for ultimate control and find a way of getting the structure to work. The conversation in the Board meetings was “I am Executive Vice-President for Marketing, so I am in control of Marketing in Russia” vs. “I am Executive Vice-President for Russia, so I am in control of Marketing in Russia”. Only after some considerable effort did the two protagonists eventually see the way forward: “How do we work together to deliver a marketing operation in Russia that delivers the best value to the Company”. In the meantime a lot of blood was shed while this and similar conversations took place across the whole organisation. The staff were left confused and frustrated while their managers conducted personal battles and left the strategy and operational plans in tatters.

Confusion and conflict are deliberate

People working in a matrix have to recognise that confusion and conflict is inherent. If there is too much clarity, then there is no need for a matrix. The purpose of a matrix is to drive communication between the matrix partners to align goals and ensure role clarity so that complexity, multiple objectives and divided loyalties are resolved. However, this means that a matrix structure requires highly developed skills in listening, agreement building, collaboration, negotiation, strategic thinking, and self awareness. Matrix working requires that you understand your impact on others and have skills in communicating effectively with people from different functions and cultures, often across large distances which require less face-to-face contact. Skills like these are not naturally present in simple hierarchies, and therefore trying to impose a matrix or project structure on people who only have experience of a traditional hierarchy is doomed to failure.

As there is little authority in a matrix, and what authority there is is often disputed, you have to find as many ways as possible to get results.

Surviving in the matrix

The six key strategies for surviving in the matrix:

1. **Focus on the organisation goals:** Conflicts of role and responsibility are resolved by negotiation in the context of the organisation’s goals. Just like the two Vice-Presidents in the example, it is the overall goal of the organisation which can bring the two (or more) parties together to collaborate on the best way forward.

2. **Know your stakeholders:** As the critic above remarks – everyone seems to have an interest. This is only a problem if you have not identified who the stakeholders and what their interests are. Ignoring their influence won't make them go away, in fact it will probably intensify their interest. Be proactive – identify everyone the people who have an interest in your project or task objective, and the interest and importance they hold. Then draw up a strategic influence plan to build their support and make sure their interests are addressed in what you do.
3. **Collaborate don't compete:** Collaboration does not come easy. Hierarchies lead to competitive behaviour – competing for limited resources, fighting for control, measuring performance through league tables, departments with different agendas, rewarding individuals and teams through bonuses and performance related pay. Collaboration is not natural for people from this background, and is often seen as a weakness and 'soft'. But competing leads to win:lose and the success of a matrix is based on win:win. Learning how to collaborate is essential – individual contribution to the whole is more important than any 'local' objective.
4. **Get on the same wavelength:** What do your matrix colleagues like? Do they like lots of detail, or are they happy with an overview? Do they like lots of contact or to be left on their own? If you don't know or don't adapt, you will antagonise the other person. We all have our different preferences – failure to adapt to others' preferences means you can't build a good relationship.
5. **Speak a number of languages:** Not literally – though if your matrix is international, this will help enormously – but learn how the people you need to collaborate with in your matrix like to communicate. The greater the range of your and flexibility in your approach, the more people you will be able to influence. The diagram shows the four main influencing styles – they all get different results and are useful for different situations, as well as helping you get on the same wavelength as the person you are trying to influence



6. **Influence and negotiate – don't persuade:** There is no one right way in a matrix; if there is, then the situation is not complex enough for a matrix structure. With complexity comes options. The matrix is no place to try to tell people what to do – this only leads to resistance, both active and passive, or a power struggle. You do not have the authority, so don't try to use it. Instead, you need to grow your influence and negotiate mutually acceptable outcomes.

Follow these six strategies and you can survive – and thrive – in a matrix or project structure. You will get the results you need without using authority and in so doing increase your influence and performance as well as building the respect and trust of those around you.



Geof Cox is the principal of New Directions Ltd, a training consultancy that specialises in helping to improve organisation communication. His latest book *Getting Results Without Authority* is published by BookShaker and focuses on the behavioural skills necessary to survive the matrix.

geofcox@newdirections.uk.com