

# How to Accelerate Implementation by Influencing Across Departments

Andrew Bass, BassClusker Consulting

One of the most frustrating and wasteful drags on implementation speed is having to wait for people in other internal departments to do things. When this occurs, your team may conclude that the other party doesn't care, isn't interested, lacks appropriate urgency or is even trying to undermine your team for political reasons.

Sometimes that is the case, but usually the reasons are much more innocent, and in fact not only are the 'guilty parties' perfectly competent and conscientious, they have been wondering why *your* team is so difficult and unresponsive!

The result is an "us-and-them" situation where both sides waste time complaining in their own camps, and trying to pass the buck up the line to their respective bosses to sort out. Those same bosses, if they are wise, will refuse to be drawn into refereeing and will instead insist that frontline leaders step up and start expediting matters for themselves.

## It's a matter of influence

The trick to getting other groups to do things is the same as the trick for all successful influence: you have to see and understand the world from the other party's perspective.

When you try and explain other people's lack of responsiveness from your own point of view, it is hard for three reasons:

- **"Out of sight, out of mind"** – we find it hard to appreciate the demands on people not in our sight. And we tend to assume that nothing else they have to do is as important as our project.
- **What is obvious to you is not necessarily obvious to them** – we tend to assume they know what we know, believe what we believe, and will therefore quite naturally act as we think they should. Therefore if they haven't done their part, we start to suspect it must be deliberate.
- **The mind has a built in bias** – psychologists tell us that we see our own slippages as the results of external factors beyond our control, whereas we tend to see those of others as being the results of their lack of competence! Enlightened Zen Master excepted, we all do this at times, and it takes practice and vigilance to set the bias aside.

These tendencies mean that we can find it easier to assume deliberate obstruction – and our fellow team members will tend to reinforce that around the water cooler. *Result:* a self-sealing "us-and-them" perspective which just slows things down further.

Again, think about it from the other side: has anybody ever assumed that *you* were being obstructive when you were just hugely busy?

(A caveat: sometimes, of course, obstruction IS deliberate. Then you might want to get out the big guns. But it's far better not to jump to that conclusion before testing for something more innocent).

## How to Improve Influence across Departments

Here's a range of tactics. Some focus on tasks, and some on relationships. You don't need to do them all. In fact it's best to pick the one or two which most suit the situation and the people you are dealing with.

1. **Always appeal to *their* self interest.** How will helping you help them? Will it make their scheduling easier, make them look good, or even just get you off their back?
2. **Identify the natural conditions under which they would willingly help you, and act to establish them.** Ask yourself: "Under what circumstances would the other person do what I want naturally and quickly?" For example, if your accounts payable policy is to accept any early payment discounts offered, and your order is being sat on by the relevant functionary, say "I need your help to take this discount for early payment before it expires".
3. **Identify in advance what and who could stall your project, and put plan-protecting actions (both 'preventive' and 'insurance') into place.** For example, if you know from past experience that a particular manager has a talent for raising annoying queries which hold projects up (perhaps as a way of feeling important) you are going to need to use some guile. Speak to them way before they are scheduled to be involved in the project to get their input – ask *them* to tell you all the potential problems with your plans and ask for recommendations (preventive action). Then ask them if you may call on them to help troubleshoot any unforeseen issues that inevitably will arise in a project of this nature (insurance action).
4. **Clarify responsibilities and nail down potential ambiguities.** When you said you needed it by Friday, what precisely are you asking them to agree to? Are you thinking lunchtime, while they are thinking 5.15pm?
5. **Create obligations by confirming the resources you are mobilising.** E.g. send an email saying "Thanks for agreeing to X. I'm visiting the client on Friday and will incorporate your comments while I am on the train so please can you confirm you will get them to me by noon".
6. **Make it easy for them to do what you want.** One of the secrets of success in direct marketing, and websites such as Amazon, is to make it really easy for people to respond. You can use the same ideas to expedite your project. Simple example: if you are chasing

someone who is supposed to phone you to discuss a document, include the document again when you chase them, and send your phone number again too – this is easy from your point of view (just forward the original email and include your signature file). If you don't do this, the other person has to look back through their inbox to find the document, dig your phone number out etc. They are more likely to put it on a to-do list where it will languish for days.

7. **Influence the influencers.** You may not be able to influence the blocking party directly, but someone can. Figure out early on who has the requisite clout: it may be their boss, it may be a mutual friend, it may be an informal opinion leader in their department who has influence just by virtue of personality, and it will often be a secretary. Build an informal influence network and use it.
8. **Work with gatekeepers and assistants.** I am sometimes amazed by the lack of astuteness of people who are rude to, or dismissive of, gatekeepers and assistants. It is unacceptable behaviour in itself, but it is also plain daft. Secretaries can get all sorts of things fast-tracked, or cause them to languish forever at the bottom of an in-tray.
9. **Invest in relationships “offline”.** It's easy, as we have noted, to fall in to the trap of assuming that the other person is blocking you on purpose. Often they are just snowed under themselves. Taking the time to build a relationship with them helps in two ways 1) you realise that they are unlikely to be blocking you on purpose 2) you have more influence when you need it.
10. **Involve them in your plan protection – once you have a good relationship.** This is the ideal situation. Early in the project you get together and discuss the sorts of issues mentioned above *together*. Remember to couch in their best interest: “Look I know your team members are really busy and I'd like to see if we can find ways to smooth out the inevitable demands this project will create. Shall we get together and figure out how to make it go as easily as possible?” Then work out your plan promoting and plan protecting actions together. Arrange a 'red telephone' so you can call if there's a problem.

## But this seems like a lot of work

Does this seem like a lot of work? It does to me. One manager said to me in frustration: “Why can't they JUST DO IT?” Here are three reasons:

1. Good management always involves thinking through potential problems and creating the best conditions for success – this is no different.
2. What's your alternative? Stakeholder risks to your project need to be managed just like any other risk, and if you don't bother, you are conceding unnecessary control of your success to others.

3. As you build your relationships across organisational boundaries, things get much easier and more streamlined – the upfront investment pays off down the line.

## Conclusion: A Leader's Day Job

A leader's day job is to get things done through other people. It's easy to assume that this just means giving instructions to people within your direct, formal reporting structure, but that isn't even a good definition of simple 'managing'.

It certainly does *not* show leadership just to pass a problem up the line and hope someone more senior will fix it.

Leadership is about taking the initiative, going first, being proactive, and building relationships in order to get things done - in new ways if necessary. Of course that takes place within agreed boundaries (legal, financial, policy, values etc), but within those boundaries, it's a lot more than simply managing to set procedures. It requires a degree of courage, flexibility of approach and a commitment not merely to tasks, but to *results*.

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## To learn more

Contact Andrew Bass: Tel: 44 (0) 121 427 7217. Email: [andrew@bassclusker.com](mailto:andrew@bassclusker.com)