

HOW TO... survive in the matrix

The matrix is back... No – this is not a call to Neo to confront the agents again in another Wachowski brothers epic. These are some practical tips for success in matrix organisation structures.

The matrix organisation is back after some decline in popularity in favour of more hierarchical structures where there is easier communication and simplicity. It is back, along with its sister structure, the project based organisation, because it reflects the complexity of the business environment that demands organisations innovate faster and leverage their resources more effectively. But the matrix also brings frustrations and confusions caused by dual (and often multiple) reporting relationships.

Matrix organisations do work, but they need to be well structured and managed. And the people in them need to know how to make them work. They improve the quality and speed of business decisions. They focus cross-functional expertise in responsive, customer facing groupings that reflect the fluid and complex environment in which the organisation operates. They cause frustration when people have not been adequately trained in the different ways of working needed, or when it has been implemented badly. Too often managers waste their energy in a fight for control in a structure where confusion and conflict is inherent. If those managing do not understand how to get results in the structure, there is little hope for the rest of the staff.

In one multinational company I consulted with, it took the consultant team 18 months to get the regional executive to finally work out how to work together collaboratively. During this time the rest of the organisation was in total confusion about what was going on.

The six key strategies for survival in the matrix:

1. FOCUS ON ORGANISATION GOALS

Conflicts of role and responsibility need to be resolved by negotiation in the context of the organisation's goals. Replace territorial fights over who's in charge with collaborative working to best achieve the overall goal.

2. KNOW YOUR STAKEHOLDERS

Everyone seems to have an interest in the decision. This is only a problem if you have not identified the stakeholders and their interests. Ignoring their influence won't make them go away, in fact it will probably intensify their interest. Be proactive – identify everyone who may have an interest in your project or objective, what their interest is, and their importance. 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 and individualist behaviour – competing for limited resources, fighting for control, individual performance targets and bonuses. Collaboration is not natural in this environment, and is often seen as a weakness and ‘soft’.

The success of a matrix is based on a win:win approach which requires highly developed skills in listening, agreement building, collaboration, negotiation, strategic thinking, and self awareness.

4. GET ON THE SAME WAVELENGTH

Matrix working requires that you have skills in communicating effectively with people from different functions and cultures, and understand your impact on others. What do your matrix colleagues want? 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? 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! Learn how the people in your matrix like to communicate. Learn a range of different communication and influencing styles to deploy in the range of situations you face in the complexity. The greater the range of your and flexibility in your approach, the more people you will be able to influence. And at the same time you will build trust and relationship.

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 come 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.

THE AUTHOR

Geof Cox is principal of New Directions Ltd. His books include *Ready-Aim-Fire Problem Solving* and *Getting Results Without Authority* which deal directly with the issues of working and surviving in project and matrix organisations. He can be contacted at geofcox@newdirections.uk.com

Readers can buy a copy of *Getting Results Without Authority* at the special price of £10.00 (UK) or £11.00 (outside UK) including p&p (RRP £12.00) from the website www.gettingresultswithoutauthority.com