

Project Failure is often Top Down

Interview with Robert Buttrick ^{1,2}

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Introduction to the interviewee

Robert Buttrick is an independent and influential advisor on portfolio, programme and project management, specialising in business-driven methods, processes and standards. He is also an Associate Teaching Fellow at the University of Warwick, a member of the British Standards Institute's committee MS2 for project management and a UK Principal Expert on the equivalent ISO technical committee, TC258 (dealing with international standards on portfolio, programme and project management).

Robert Buttrick is also known as the author of the book *The Project Workout*. The book, as the flagship publication on business-led project management, based on his field experience in the direction of portfolios across sectors as a successful practitioner, has been translated into a number of languages. Robert Buttrick is also a co-author of the PRINCE2 (2017 edition) with a focus on practical considerations and tailoring, as well as a contributor to other books such as the “Handbook of project portfolio management”

¹ This interview was first published in PMR, *Project Management Review* magazine earlier this year. It is republished here with the permission of PMR. The PM World Journal maintains a cooperative relationship with PMR, periodically republishing works from each other's publications. To see the original interview with Chinese introduction, visit PMR at <http://www.pmreview.com.cn/english/>

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Routledge, 2018; “Gower Handbook of Programme Management”, Gower 2016; APM Body of Knowledge (5th and 6th editions).

Due to his efforts, Robert Buttrick has received many awards. For example, in 2010, Robert received a Distinguished Service Certificate from the BSI for services to national and international project management standards, and in 2013 he was made an Honorary Fellow of the Association for Project Management (APM).

To know more about Robert Buttrick, please read the following interview or visit his website: www.projectworkout.com.

Interview

Part I: From ‘engineering’ towards ‘project management’

Q1. What’s your story with project management? Why did you choose project management as your profession? As a leading expert in this field, what are the contributing factors for your success?

Robert Buttrick (Buttrick): I didn’t think of myself as ‘being in project management’ until I’d been working for about 12 years. The early part of my career was as a consulting civil engineer, undertaking feasibility studies, designing and supervising the construction of civil engineering works. The word ‘project’ was used all the time but as part of the backdrop for my day-to-day work.

The world-wide recession in the early 1980s provided the catalyst for my gradual move away from ‘engineering’ towards ‘project management’. The market for consulting engineers was shrinking fast and many consultancies were disappearing. I spent two years building internal management systems for the engineering consultancy I still worked for. The new systems monitored cashflow, profitability, market analysis, bid management, pricing and foreign currency transactions, and the firm moved from losing money towards being profitable again.

I then moved to PA Consulting to become a management consultant, specializing in business-led project management. This drew on my both engineering skills and recent management experience. I worked on project management related assignments covering a range of sectors, including property development, banking, environmental management and manufacturing. I learnt to make sure that every project is driven by a business need. The fundamental question is, “Why are we undertaking a project?” After

PA, I worked in several large commercial organisations, introducing portfolio, programme and project management. Currently, I am an independent consultant, advising the UK government and other large organisations. I am also an Associate Teaching Fellow at the University of Warwick.

I think 'success' for me came with being curious, wanting to learn and see tangible results. I want my work to be of direct help to people in organizations. I also have a very broad view on how to apply project management as a strategic management tool and adopt, what is now termed, a 'whole system approach'. Naturally, the publication of my book, *The Project Workout*, added to my credibility, as did my involvement in the development of British and International Standards.

Q2. You've worked for more than 30 years. What are the things that you are most proud of and what are the challenging parts in your career? Please offer some tips for newcomers in project management.

Buttrick: That is a big question. I am still proud that there is a port complex in Yemen for which I designed some major elements and spent three years supervising the construction; Yassa Arafat did the official opening! I am proud of my book *The Project Workout*, which has sold well and has been translated into a number of languages. It always delights me when total strangers across the world introduce themselves and feel they know me.

Initially, I was reluctant to specialize in methods and standards and only moved into that field part-way through my career when my boss wanted a project management method; "You are just the right person; you'll keep it brief and practical!", he said. I soon began to realize my work on the development of enterprise-wide corporate methods was important, more so when I found that far too many organizations don't have such capabilities! This practical experience later enabled me to influence the development of British and International Standards to be outcome-oriented and benefits-driven, rather than simply vehicles for delivering outputs.

The biggest challenges for me have been in times of recession, not least helping (but not always successfully) senior leaders realize the power of project management as a strategic business tool. Dealing with the tough times, however, is part of project management and has brought opportunities to broaden my experience, although sometimes I did wonder if I cared more about the survival of a business than its leaders did! A quick look at the *Harvard Business Review*, shows that 'project management' has less than half the number of case studies and about the a fifth of the number of articles as 'change management' and yet the two are inextricably linked; I think that puts the challenge of engaging senior management into perspective.

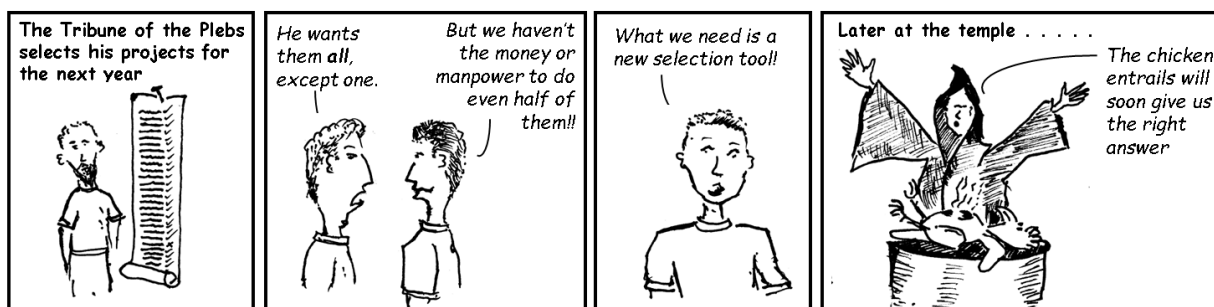
My advice to anyone new to project management is to stay interested, make your own success and don't stagnate. This doesn't mean constantly moving companies. In project management, a job can be enriched simply by trying new approaches, innovating, and learning and applying new skills. Challenge yourself to learn something new every week! Don't assume you know the answer to everything or there is only one way to do something. Always stay open to new ideas but don't be seduced by the latest jargon and fads; look for what is at their core and really matters.

Part II : Highlights of *The Project Workout*

Q3. As you mentioned, your book *The Project Workout* has been translated into a number of languages. In your opinion, what are the highlights of the book?

Buttrick: When *The Project Workout* was published in 1997, project management was often regarded as “something that engineers and technicians do”. The book exploded that myth by looking at project management from a completely different perspective to other books around at the time. The book takes a business-led approach, is built on first-hand experience and is written in plain English! **I am not an academic and have been directly involved in ‘doing’ everything the book advocates.** It is not just ‘theory’. Similarly, the ‘workouts’ are techniques I have used myself and coached others to use. I also believe working life is too serious not to have fun! A highlight of the book is the cartoons. Here is one:

Don't lose touch with reality, even if you have great ideas



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Since 1997, when the first edition was published, programme and portfolio management have moved on considerably and certain terminology has become established, not least through the publication of International Standards. The 5th edition of *The Project Workout* is a major rewrite of the 4th edition, which takes the emerging terminology into account. When planning the 5th edition, I realized it would be too fat to fit in its jacket and decided to divide it into two books., *The Project Workout (5th edition)* now deals with directing and managing one project at a time. The other half forms a separate book, *The Programme*

and *Portfolio Workout*, which deals with (obviously) programmes and portfolios. The two books are based on the same principles and designed to be used together; they replace and enhance the single volume 4th edition.

Part III : Root of project failure and success criteria

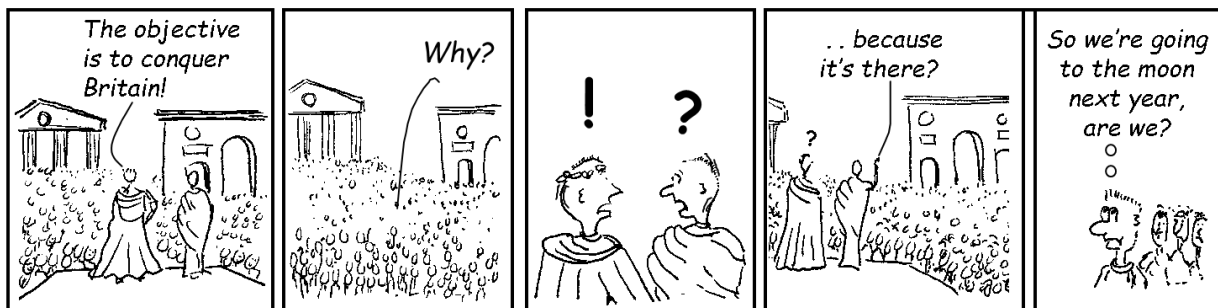
Q4. As you know, the rate of project failure remains high worldwide. You've been involved in the direction of portfolios of over 2,500 projects. Based on your observation, what are the common reasons for project failure?

Buttrick: In my experience, failure is often 'top-down'; in other words, **the root of failure is in senior management action or inaction.** In many cases, a project manager doesn't stand a chance. The sponsoring organization simply makes it too difficult to succeed, say by withdrawing resources or moving the goal posts. The first time I introduced true portfolio management to a major company, I started by looking at how products and services were developed there. There were about 140 projects under way but only one or two a month were delivered and were often faulty. By using the techniques described in my books, the portfolio was reduced to 90 projects and, as a result, products, were delivered at the rate of three to four a week, mostly fault-free. The same people were managing the projects and there were no new management information systems. The big change was in the behaviour of the decision-makers. They simply wouldn't allow a project to be started (or continue) unless there was a compelling business reason, funding and committed resources. This approach was so successful, it was extended to cover the entire business, with about 2,500 projects in seven portfolios.

Q5. In your view, how should we define the "success" of a project? Obviously, the iron triangle isn't enough.

Buttrick: You are right. In my view, the 'iron triangle' was dead back in the 1990s and I find it astonishing (and disappointing) when I see people still using it as the basis to determine the success of a project. The iron triangle might be helpful for assessing a work package but **for a business-led project, outcomes and benefits matter. Success must be related to the reasons the project was started in the first place.** If you aren't sure on WHY you want to undertake a project, you probably won't be able to define its success criteria! One problem is that 'success' can be very political and mean different things to different people, which can be very challenging when stakeholders have diverse objectives.

The question "why" is very powerful



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Part IV: Three roles of sponsors

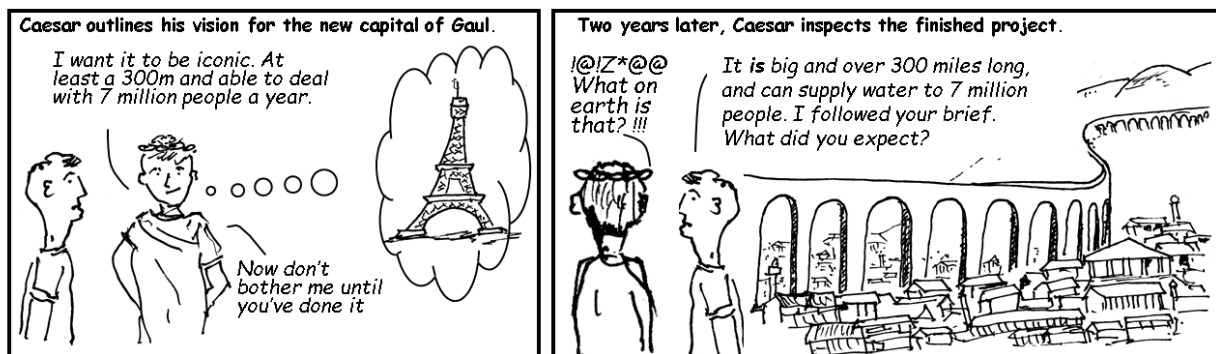
Q6. Surveys indicate that effective sponsorship is essential to project success. You hold that a sponsor should have three roles (Leader; Change Agent; Decision-maker); would you please elaborate on this?

Buttrick: In response to an earlier question, I described 'top-down failure' and how portfolio management can be used to make sure the right projects are selected and can be completed. **The sponsor also has a major part to play in stopping top-down failure.** In the first company I introduced portfolio management to, each project sponsor was required to attend the project authorization meetings; it is, after all, 'their project'. This is when the sponsor asks for funds and resources to be committed. The sponsor was not allowed to delegate attendance at this meeting and if the sponsor did not turn up, the project was either placed on hold or rejected. In this way, the board members making the 'go/no go' decision and the sponsor were able to eye-ball each other; there was no place to hide. This built commitment far more than a remote 'signature endorsing' approach. The executive team could assess how committed the sponsor really was and whether there were sound arguments to change the status quo. Does the sponsor:

- have a compelling vision for the outcomes the project will deliver;
- understand the stakeholder landscape;
- have the guts to make decisions and to be held to account for them?

I discuss effective sponsorship in depth in *The Programme and Portfolio Workout*.

You must be able to communicate your vision and stay engaged



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Part V : About the Project Delivery Functional Standard

Q7. The UK government launched the Project Delivery Functional Standard, for which you are the lead author. Why is it important and what is it mainly about?

Buttrick: The UK public sector is enormous and sponsors some of the largest projects in the world, yet each government department is a separate organization, often supported by a myriad of semi-autonomous 'arm's length bodies'. **The Project Delivery Functional Standard is a reference to set expectations for the direction and management of portfolios, programmes and projects. It is designed to guide people working in and with the UK government by providing a coherent and mutually understood way of working across organizational boundaries by setting out a stable foundation for assurance, risk management, and capability improvement.** For example, one government department, found that its project delivery approach covered only 40 per cent of what the standard required; as a result, the department was able to take action to fill the gaps. The Project Delivery Functional Standard is one of a dozen interrelated functional standards which are a fundamental step in making joined-up government a reality. Functional standards state 'what' needs to be done and 'why'; they do not define 'how' anything should be done and are not strait jackets to constrain people. Functional standards can be used for assurance, assessment of maturity and to help senior leaders ask the right questions. Anyone can download a free copy from the government's website.

Part VI: People over processes

Q8. Many experts hold that people are more important than tools and processes. As an expert involved in the creation of many PM standards, do you agree? Why or why not?

Buttrick: **I have always said, "Give me great people to work with over great methodologies."** But we do not always have 'great people'; we often need to work with

the people we are given. Research has shown that the number of people with the perfect 'project manager profile' is far less than the number of project managers needed. **So, how do we make the ordinary perform in an extraordinary way? Use methods; provide tools and techniques; develop people's skills and capability.** Even with great people, methods are still needed to enable teams of mixed capabilities to work together effectively and efficiently. The difference between the great and the ordinary is that the great do not need as much guidance. The trick is to get the right weight of method and to design methods to give both what they need. **In summary, we need people, tools and processes in the right balance; it isn't an 'either-or' choice.**

Managing people is not just a numbers game



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* In Rome, chariot race teams (named by colours) attracted fanatical support.

We need standards so that those who design project management methods, manage projects or undertake project assurance can check they have covered everything that's needed. Standards can be trusted as they are built on the consensus and experience of a wide range of subject matter experts involved in their drafting. Standards can also help avoid misunderstandings, as they provide definitions of commonly used terms and concepts. **In this way, standards are important in that they provide a way of communicating proven good practice.** I think standards could be used more in universities when teaching project management and in organizations, when drafting their project management methods.

Q9. Do you believe project management methods will be useful in confronting emergencies such as Coronavirus? Why do you think managing emergencies is different?

Buttrick: I know that project management is already essential in combatting coronavirus; hospitals have been built and commissioned in weeks, factories re-purposed, food and medical equipment supply chains radically over-hauled and the development of vaccines initiated. These types of major initiatives do not happen by accident. Project management is, at a basic level, about agreeing and achieving a desired outcome, getting the right people together, working out how to achieve the aims,

anticipating what might go wrong, sorting out what has gone wrong, and getting back on track. That is fundamental when confronting emergencies.

If you need to do something at speed, it is important to have experienced people using established methods; there is no time to make up new ways of working. The methods must then be rapidly tailored to fit the need and the capabilities of the project team. Undertaking projects in such circumstances forces you to challenge existing ways of working and to rip out non-value-added bureaucracy. Only experienced people know how to do that. Under stress conditions:

- you often have greater senior level commitment and active participation. In other words, rather than having a culture of top-down failure through ‘absentee sponsorship’, success is driven through effective sponsorship and alignment on objectives;
- people tend to have an explicit shared aim and so the challenge of getting the team aligned around the objectives can sometimes be easier;
- mistakes are more tolerated, and taking risks are allowable, simply especially when the alternative of procrastination and inaction usually only makes matters worse.

What can make the critical difference is the ability of the leaders, at all levels, to motivate their teams and keep them focused, despite whatever the emergency throws at them and in the face of criticism.

To read the original interview and to learn more about PMR magazine, visit
<http://www.pmreview.com.cn/english/>



About the Interviewer



Yu Yanjuan

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Yu Yanjuan (English name: Spring), Bachelor's Degree, graduated from the English Department of Beijing International Studies University (BISU) in China. She is now an English-language journalist and editor working for *Project Management Review* (PMR) Magazine and website. She has interviewed over sixty top experts in the field of project management. Before joining PMR, she once worked as a journalist and editor for other media platforms in China. She has also worked part-time as an English teacher in training centers in Beijing. Beginning in January 2020, Spring also serves as an international correspondent for the *PM World Journal*.

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