



Building Rome in a Day

Coming to Terms with Unrealistic Schedules

Lon Roberts, Ph.D.

Among the fragments in his personal notes, American poet Theodore Roethke lamented that “What we need is more people who specialize in the impossible.” One wonders if Roethke might have felt compelled to jot down this statement on the heels of being reminded for the umpteenth time that “Rome wasn’t built in a day.” We may never know for sure, since Roethke died in 1963, but his remark speaks for all who have experienced the frustration of having to deal with those who use this cliché as justification—or an excuse, if you will—for why things take as long as they do.

When the question of “Why did we overrun the schedule?” comes up in project post-mortem analyses, there is at least one response that is predictable: “The schedule was unrealistic to begin with.” Problem defined, root cause identified, on to the next issue!

Of course, there truly is such a thing as an unrealistic schedule, but to discern whether this is a legitimate explanation or an excuse for poor performance it is necessary to determine if the conditions were such that a schedule overrun was inevitable. After more than 20 years of paying attention to this phenomenon, I am convinced that

Roberts is a principal partner with Roberts & Roberts Associates and author of the book *Process Reengineering: The Key to Achieving Breakthrough Success*.

conditions are to blame in the majority of cases—at least 80 percent of the late projects I am personally aware of. In other words, except for the occasional project schedule that is truly unrealistic under the best of circumstances, it is often the case that what gets pegged as an unrealistic schedule might be labeled otherwise if the system were more accommodating—that is, if the conditions were different. As obvious as this may seem from the stratosphere looking down, consider the fact that the solution to the “unrealistic schedule” problem on the tarmac is typically met with a request for more time, rather than suggestions on how the system might be altered to accommodate the schedule. There seems to be a tacit assumption that if a project schedule is judged to be unrealistic given the circumstances, then that’s the end of the story; the circumstances are immutable.

Regardless of the label, it speaks to the importance of approaching time-critical projects with an attitude that ‘building Rome in a day’ is possible—at least figuratively—if circumstances are alterable.



Entertaining the thought that the system might be made to conform to the schedule, rather than the schedule to the system, requires a bold leap in and of itself. But making the impossible possible starts with something even more fundamental, more intangible, more deeply rooted in the human spirit than this. It goes by different names and because it falls within the realm of what some disparagingly refer to as “touchy-feely” and can’t be depicted as a bar on a Gantt chart, it often gets downplayed or simply overlooked. Some call it “can-do thinking,” and others refer to it as “possibility thinking.” In a NASA report, *Shared Voyage: Learning and Unlearning from Remarkable Projects*, the authors describe this quality as the “will to win,” and they place it at the head of a short list of critical success factors. But regardless of the label, it speaks to the importance of approaching time-critical projects with an attitude that “building Rome in a day” is possible—at least figuratively—if circumstances are alterable. Furthermore, the potential to accomplish remarkable projects is more likely when everyone is on board with this philosophy. The authors of the NASA report had this to say about that: “In the highly demanding and dynamic project environment, leaders encourage even their contractors to adopt a will to win by challenging the status quo.”

But the status quo hasn’t earned the reputation for being the obdurate force it is by being an easy mark for change.

And its intransigence is aided and abetted by what I call the “800-year-old excuse”—an ancient premise, with a contemporary pretext, that has persisted to the point that it appears to have become lodged in our mental DNA.

The 800-Year-Old Excuse

The “Rome wasn’t built in a day” phrase is thought to have originated in the late 12th century. If so, humans have relied on this comeback for over 800 years as an excuse for why deadlines and other time commitments have not been met. The phrase may indeed be a cliché, but to endure since the Dark Ages, it apparently communicates something that is universally understood. If so, what might that be?

On its surface, “Rome wasn’t built in a day” appears to be an innocuous metaphor for stating the obvious: a genuine work of quality takes time. But in the subterranean world of veiled threats, the user of the cliché may have something more sinister in mind. Without saying so explicitly, he or she may be challenging the person to whom it is directed to answer this gotcha question: “Do you really want to be responsible for cutting corners on quality, despite my objection to doing so?” After all, if quality is compromised and problems later arise, all fingers will likely point back to the corner-cutting decision maker. There is nothing more immodest than a naked decision!

But there is a fundamental flaw in this line of reasoning, especially in circumstances where rapid results are important. In situations such as these—when time is of the essence—time itself is a value-added quality attribute, much the same as any other quality attribute. It is not simply a constraint to be monitored, managed, and worked within or around. Furthermore, in the fast-paced, technology-centric world in which we live, the quest for rapid results is not limited to crisis situations; it is increasingly becoming the norm rather than the exception. For instance, in the day-to-day world of industries that compete on the basis of time-to-market, a perfectly designed generation-A product that’s late to market will likely be rendered obsolete well before its time by a less perfectly designed generation-B product from a competitor. An analogous statement might be said about systems that are critical for military readiness, though the stakes are considerably higher and the enemy is not bound by any standards of fair play.

The Power of Irrational Exuberance

Coupled with a willingness and ability to reengineer the project environment, a can-do attitude serves as the catalyst for taking on what might otherwise be deemed as an unrealistic schedule—and in a figurative sense, flipping the “Rome wasn’t built in a day” platitude on its head. In slightly different terms, it is the place where the spirit of can-do determination intersects with the system’s capacity to do what needs to be done. Critics may regard it as “irrational exuberance,” but the facts tell a different story. Besides, “irrational” is a subjective term at best.

An early example of the power of what may have appeared to some as irrational exuberance is the first Transcontinental Railroad—now considered to be the greatest technological achievement of the 19th Century. Inspired by the can-do leadership of President Lincoln—a man who also knew a thing or two about making a compelling case—this massive undertaking was launched in 1862, at a time when the American Civil War was going strong, resources were scarce, and the hearts and minds of the American people were focused elsewhere. Despite a costly war, the assassination of a president, brutal weather conditions, rugged terrain, and even a self-defeating system for compensating contractors, this 1,777-mile mega-project was completed in 1869, less than 7 years from start to finish!

A more recent example is the P-51 Mustang fighter airplane that played a pivotal role in the Allies' success in winning the air war over Europe in World War II. Compelled by the pressure of war, in 1940 the British government awarded a contract to the American company, North American Aviation (NAA), to design and build a prototype of the P-51 on the seemingly unrealistic schedule of 120 days. Despite the circumstances—technical, political, cultural, and logistical challenges—NAA rose to the occasion and delivered the prototype 117 days after the contract was awarded! It was a feat that an article in the July 1943 edition of *Popular Science* would later describe as “building a ship that would be a full year ahead of its time when it first saw action.”

Though the P-51 is best remembered for its success as both a bomber escort and an attack aircraft in WWII, project managers and mission directors would do well to learn from the P-51's rapid design and development. One of the most important lessons is reflected in the words of the president of NAA at the time, Dutch Kindelberger. In his appeal to grant his company the opportunity to design and build the P-51 prototype—in lieu becoming a mass-production facility for the Curtiss P-40, a plane in service since 1938—Kindelberger told the British, “I can build you a better airplane, and I can build it fast.” A pretty gutsy claim considering he had no detailed drawing or plans at the time!

There is no record I am aware of that hints at the degree Kindelberger's tone of voice or body language may have played in convincing the British. But given that he was an engineer and not a thespian, we can be pretty sure that they believed that he believed what he said was possible. Furthermore, by virtue of his position in the company he was able to take a leadership role in transforming a system that till then had been in the business of mass-producing a trainer airplane into one that was up to the task of creating a prototype for new high-performance fighter plane—and to do so given an unrealistic schedule.

Reframing the Solution

These projects and others like them that are open to scrutiny—such as the NASA missions deployed in the 1990s utiliz-

ing the Faster, Better, Cheaper (FBC) approach—tell a story about the potential of can-do thinking. But can-do thinking is a state of mind, an attitude, a willingness to buck the tide that must be accompanied by bold actions. After all, conventional practices are destined to deliver conventional results—not a rosy prospect considering the low percentage of projects that are completed on time and within budget using conventional project management processes and tools.


On a personal note, this unsettling reality led me on a quest—around the time NASA adopted the FBC approach—to discover if the lessons learned from reducing the cycle time of business processes could be brought to bear on projects and the project environment. From a practical standpoint, I discovered that the “start with a blank sheet of paper” paradigm did not work well for processes or projects, although it was (and continues to be) helpful in visualizing what might be possible if circumstances were ideal. And as systems guru Russell Ackoff rightly pointed out in his book *Idealized Design*, “When we change our point of view and look backward at where we are from where we want to be, in many cases the obstructions disappear.”

Making the obstructions disappear doesn't require starting with a blank sheet of paper, but any truly ambitious assault on



Without saying so explicitly, he or she may be challenging the person to whom it is directed to answer this gotcha question: 'Do you really want to be responsible for cutting corners on quality, despite my objection to doing so?'

project cycle time does require a willingness to examine every aspect of the system—up, down, inside, and out—that directly or indirectly influences the way projects are planned, led, and executed. In other words, it requires a willingness to reframe our thinking about the project framework and then exercise the courage to go the next step and actually remove the barriers. It requires organizing the system around the schedule, and not vice-versa.

As long as we don't succumb to the “Rome wasn't built in a day” attitude, there is hope for winning the war against the unrealistic schedule. It is a war worth waging! 

The author can be reached at lon@R2assoc.com.