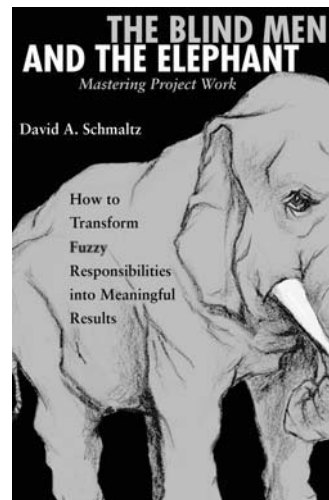


# THE BLIND MEN AND THE ELEPHANT - MASTERING PROJECT WORK

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## A SUMMARY OF THE ORIGINAL WORK

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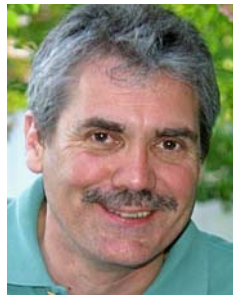


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## ABOUT THE AUTHOR

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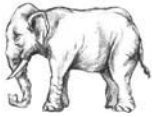
*“creating new frames of reference for approaching projects ”*

David A. Schmaltz is an author, teacher, principled consultant, and founder of True North project guidance strategies, Inc., a strategic consultancy focused on helping people work really well together. His latest book, *The Blind Men and the Elephant: Mastering Project Work—How to Transform Fuzzy Responsibilities into Meaningful Results* (Berrett-Koehler Publishers), joins David's earlier work, [\*This Isn't a Cookbook: The Elements of Project Style\*](#), and True North's newsletter, [\*Compass\*](#), in sharing his unique insights into adaptive project work.

Prior to founding True North, David was president and principal consultant of Silicon Valley's Ontara Corporation. In 1996, David purchased Ontara's intellectual property, incorporating it into True North's Mastering Projects Workshop to extend the usefulness of Ontara's initial research into what makes high technology projects work.

David created True North's uniquely powerful Brief Consulting model, authored True North's Mastering Projects Workshop, and acts as editor of and principal contributor to *Compass*. David also served as faculty for Jerry and Dani Weinberg's Problem Solving Leadership Workshop.

David uses his role as writer and consultant to help people learn what they need to know to make their assignments work well. His expertise includes creating new frames of reference for approaching projects and helping clients discover how their own practical models apply to their real-world situations.



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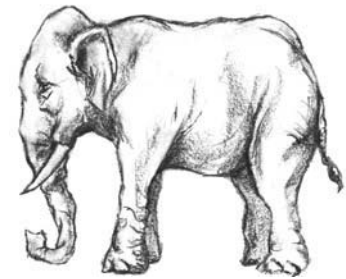
*The Big Idea*

***“ even the most difficult effort can become a juicy experience, ... so everyone wants to do another one like that again.”***

### THE BIG IDEA

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Even the most difficult projects can become juicy personal experiences. Successful project completion takes more than logistical coordination—it requires uniting a wide variety of perspectives. Though everyone involved remains unavoidably “blind” to each other’s point of view, this blindness need not inhibit successful completion nor create wicked experiences.



The objective is not to overcome this inevitable blindness but to properly leverage it. Properly leveraged, even the most difficult effort can become a juicy experience, so that when it’s over, everyone wants to do another one like that again.

This book shows how to bridge the gaps between inevitably blind perspectives. It explains how to achieve coherence, which enables even the most encumbered to meaningfully work together. The entertaining stories come from the author’s personal project work experiences and from instructive metaphors.

### INTRODUCTION

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Over the last decade, a revolution occurred in project work. What used to be definable by simple, step-wise plans has become increasingly uncertain—fuzzier and fuzzier. Despite this revolution, project traditions persist. Companies expect managers to control these projects as if they were controlling the more concrete projects from the past. Projects are surrounded by the evidence of misguided expectations:

- *Management lays fixed track, expecting everyone to get on it and stay on it—or to get back on it, should they stray.*

*Every individual has the power to transform their experience from meaningless obligation to juicy opportunity.*

- *Funding authorities cling to traditional success criteria, expecting "on-time, on-budget, on-spec" performances, regardless of the shifting context.*
- *Auditors continue to expect detailed plans early in projects, even though both auditors and project managers know that they will be shocked by the magnitude of the changes over time.*
- *Managers still gauge progress by inches, expecting their team members to explain every deviation.*

Clinging to these traditions transforms challenging, fuzzy projects into impossibly "wicked" ones. Every individual involved in these efforts has the power, often unrecognized, to transform his or her own experience from wicked to fuzzy; from meaningless obligation to juicy opportunity.

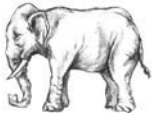
The book considers a more appropriate frame of reference for engaging in this fuzzy work, proposing that these efforts are more meaningfully approached as extended conversations than as simple exercises in command and control. The author anchors this proposition in John Godfrey Saxe's 19th-century poem, *The Blind Men and the Elephant*.

In this fable, six blind men decide to "see" an elephant:

- *The first finds the elephant's side, interpreting the animal as being a wall blocking the way to anything meaningful.*
- *The second happens upon a tusk, deciding that the animal is a spear that any good soldier might feel obligated to carry into battle.*
- *The third touches the trunk, concluding that the elephant is a snake that no one should trust.*
- *The fourth feels a leg, describing the elephant as a tree trunk supporting everyone's efforts.*
- *The fifth chances upon an ear, experiencing the animal as a fan that might coax an ember into a flame.*
- *The sixth grabs the tail, declaring that the beast is very much like a rope that can tie together a coherent whole.*



Because the blind men cannot agree on what the elephant really is, rather than seeing the elephant, they engage in an endless argument—with the ferocity and certainty of any theologic war—where each individual is right and all are in the wrong. The author uses these



## THE BLIND MEN AND THE ELEPHANT - MASTERING PROJECT WORK

### Introduction

metaphors to show how to transform project fuzziness into the means for creating coherent and collectively meaningful results.

## THE NEED FOR COHERENCE

Each project contributor will, like the fabled blind men, carry a unique notion of the overall work effort; each perspective will be different from what others hold. These differences between individual perception and collective reality make project work fuzzy. Coherence can resolve these difficulties. Coherence is that state where we see the world through each other's eyes—where we quite magically catch ourselves seeing the world as others see it.

***Coherence:  
that state where  
we quite  
magically catch  
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others see it***

The story of the six blind men and the elephant illustrates a lack of coherence. Each blind man experiences a portion of the whole animal, perceiving his part as representing a whole, when it does not. Insisting that he sees the elephant, each experiences only his piece of the overall effort, and no one else's.

The delusion that one perspective is or should be the same as any other's encourages incoherence. Incoherence sparks theological wars, not meaningful results. So emerges the need for a leader who can induce coherence when multiple perspectives tangle.

Every project replays the story of these blind men around an elephant. From within each individual's personal experience, it seems only reasonable to conclude that everyone else arrayed around the beast experiences this animal as he does. But the individual's personal experience most certainly does not reasonably mirror everyone else's. It's not supposed to.

When each blind man can integrate every other blind man's curious testimony with his own perspective, a collective coherence emerges along with the elephant. This coherence creates remarkable possibilities, as if the blind men could actually see through each other's eyes. Coherence-building leadership requires integrating disparate perspectives, not enforcing a single, dominant one.

The author explores the blind men's experiences through metaphors—the wall, the spear, the snake, the tree, the fan, and the rope—to more properly explain effective leader and follower roles.

## THE WALL: DISCOVERING PURPOSE

The wall signifies a barrier between achieving the project's objective and using the effort to pursue a personally compelling purpose. At the beginning, uncovering the project's objective seems to overshadow any need to discover personal purpose. When the going gets tougher, though, many are tempted to simply sacrifice themselves for the effort, as if they could improve the result by choosing to forgo any personal reward.

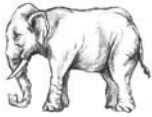
The most often overlooked critical success factor is the answer to a deeply personal question, "What do I want?"



*The most often overlooked critical success factor is the answer to a deeply personal question, "What do I want?"*

- *Every assignment offers opportunity as well as obligation. We easily focus so intently upon the obligation that we miss any opportunity to use our assignment as a medium for pursuing what we truly want for ourselves. A compelling personal purpose makes any work more meaningful.*
- *Projects succeed and projects fail—either way, projects eventually end. Project work brings the certainty that you are working yourself out of a job. This easily translates into working yourself out of a life unless you know how to use your project assignment to create your life.*
- *Walls appear when people lose touch with what they want from their project experience. The effort to clarify, quantify, and satisfy the project's objectives fades into meaninglessness when individuals fail to connect their effort to something they want. Rather than engaging by asking only, "What do you want me to do?" consider extending your inquiry to ask, "What do I want?"*

You have to know what you want in order to overcome the wall. When powered by the pursuit of a personally juicy purpose, who could be depleted by any effort? Understand the project's objective but don't neglect to find your own project within your project assignment. Know what you want.



**THE BLIND MEN AND THE ELEPHANT - MASTERING PROJECT WORK**  
*The Spear: Bringing Your Own Good Judgment into Play*

## **THE SPEAR: BRINGING YOUR OWN GOOD JUDGMENT INTO PLAY**

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The elephant's tusk might seem like a spear, a defensive weapon. However, it might as easily serve as a walking stick. Does your project really need a defensive weapon more than it needs a walking stick? What does your own good judgment tell you?

In military service, orders are supposed to be carried out as commanded. Obedience and discipline are the highest priority. Individual judgment shrinks beneath the expectation of blind obedience. Is your project really a war? Does it require a battlefield's good-soldier compliance? Perhaps you could put to better use what first seemed necessarily like a spear.

Fuzzy projects need "bad" soldiers, people who will

- *Insist upon choices*
- *Leave their options open*
- *Question authority*
- *Tolerate well the potential embarrassment and inconvenience that come with using their own good judgment*

Fuzzy projects demand leaders who can

- *Leave an array of implementation alternatives open to their teams*
- *Rely on the best judgment of those doing the work*
- *Accept results other than exactly what they first expected*

Fuzzy project work requires a variety of approaches, where the means can more often be decided by something other than command and control. We must assert our own good judgment in our work or suffer under the judgment of fools.



***“We must assert our own good judgment in our work or suffer under the judgment of fools.”***



*“Where trust cannot find a foothold, meaningful success seems to slip away, too.”*

## THE SNAKE: CREATING TRUST

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You can always trust a snake to be a snake. Give someone the label of snake, and he'll seem to become determined to live up to the name you've given him. Trust is an essential element within fuzzy projects. Where trust cannot find a foothold, meaningful success seems to slip away, too.

Trust cannot be earned, but it can be extended. The author explores the relationship between the Peanuts cartoon characters Charlie Brown and Lucy as they play with a football to demonstrate how trusting becomes its own reward and distrust creates a self-fulfilling, sorry sort of safety.

We create trust by extending it. We undermine the possibility of trustworthiness by withholding trust. If someone has proved herself to be a snake, by all means extend caution and protect yourself and your project. But if you expect someone to prove herself worthy of your trust, you must extend your trust first; otherwise, you'll more than likely find just another snake slithering into your effort.



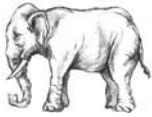
## THE TREE: DISCOVERING ORGANIZATION

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Trees are hierarchies branching both up and down from a central trunk. We see the trunk or the canopy and recognize a tree without seeing the part of the sustaining organization working silently below ground. Project organizations are hierarchies that seem to branch from a central point. But like trees, project organizations are more complex than they appear. When we see a team pursuing an objective, we







## THE BLIND MEN AND THE ELEPHANT - MASTERING PROJECT WORK

*The Fan: Encouraging an Ember into Flame*

***“Our impatience with the ordering process will always be the strongest barrier to robust order.”***

recognize a project without ever detecting the invisible networks sustaining it.

Organization means something different to those organizing than to those being organized. Being organized suggests that some have to follow another's organization, to adopt another's sense of natural order.

What about when this imposed order doesn't feel orderly? How can order be achieved by anyone forgoing his natural sense of order and adopting someone else's orderliness?

However a leader might formally organize an effort, its informal organization will sustain it. A community will emerge. These communities, these informal sustaining networks of relationships, cannot be engineered, but they can emerge with patience. Sitting with the initial disorder can encourage a more coherent and robust community, regardless of the formal organization chosen or imposed.

Our impatience with the ordering process will always be the strongest barrier to robust order. Our reluctance to sit in the middle of the mess long enough to understand and come to some agreement about its nature before responding to it remains our greatest adversary when planning. Our urgent need for order seems at the root of our projects' continuing disorder.

## THE FAN: ENCOURAGING AN EMBER INTO FLAME

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No one is apathetic, except when pursuing someone else's goals. The leader's efforts at motivating don't motivate most project participants. Dangling carrots and threatening sticks can't create coherent community, and incoherent community has always been the true source of poor project performance. A leader's proper role cannot be found in motivating his community.



***“Every member of every project community is fully capable of motivating himself.”***

Every member of every project community is fully capable of motivating himself. If motivation is an individual responsibility, what can the leader contribute? He can help each member find his project within his project assignment.

Who could fail to feel motivated if she is using her project assignment to pursue some personally juicy objective? Incoherence results whenever people lose connection with their personal purpose for being involved. Collective coherence naturally grows from clarifying individual purpose.

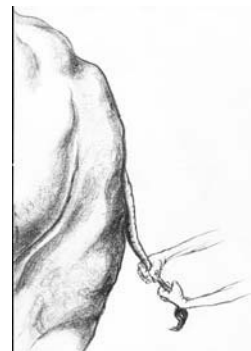
Their motivation has to be their own responsibility. Everyone has a spark inside and everyone can fan his own spark into flame. A leader can help another find his fan and his spark, his project within his project assignment, by listening and simply pointing out what might not have been very obvious to him. A listening ear can help another discover the ember already smoldering inside.

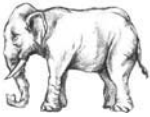
## THE ROPE: CONNECTING WITH COHERENCE

How do leaders create coherent project communities? They don't! Coherence emerges from community. A leader can encourage a few preconditions that help create a sense of community from which coherence can emerge.

Coherent communities share some, and sometimes all, of the following preconditions:

- *Blindness—They are composed of acknowledged “blind men” rather than blind certainty. They see that they cannot see everything. Embracing blindness doesn't turn out to be either a hopeless or a helpless strategy, but one that appropriately sets the frame of reference for an effort.*
- *Elephant—They share an ungraspable something, an elephant. Complexity creates elephants. When an objective can be achieved*





## THE BLIND MEN AND THE ELEPHANT - MASTERING PROJECT WORK

*The Rope: Connecting with Coherence*

***Coherence,  
that ability to  
similarly  
interpret  
shared  
experiences,  
amplifies every  
project's  
purpose.***

*only by bringing together many different perspectives, elephants are usually around.*

- *Frustrating common experiences—They have survived a struggle together. Coherence gets forged from messes. Communities that have not evolved beyond their initial nice-niceness rarely experience the coherence beyond.*
- *Patience—They hasten slowly, understanding that coherence might not emerge until near the end of their effort, but it will be well worth the wait. Pursuing coherence creates coherence, but only over time.*
- *Generous interpretations—Rather than make up scathing stories to explain obvious shortcomings, individuals choose to make the most generous possible interpretations of others' curious behavior. The fabled blind men failed to see the elephant, not because they didn't have the information necessary to see it, but because they chose to interpret each other's testimony less than generously. Generosity requires no one's permission. It's something anyone can afford.*
- *Coherent organization—Some communities also adopt a coherent organization structure; they circle up and focus upon a common point. Circling around the elephant brings all perspectives into equal play.*

Coherence, that ability to similarly interpret shared experiences, is not the purpose of any project, yet it amplifies every purpose. Project management cannot create the coherence that enables projects to become adaptive and self-managing, but the individuals on any project can devise it. One who is acting alone can significantly influence its emergence. Several acting together can guarantee it.

## THEOLOGIC WARS

Books on project work usually focus upon either the mechanical or the human elements. This author decides that project work is always a human effort, employing both mechanical and human elements. He tires of choosing sides when the point seems to be integrating the many perspectives. He concludes:



***“May this elephant emerge whenever you engage.”***

“I hope this book has reassured you that your project experiences can be extraordinary without ever satisfying ‘how they were supposed to be.’ How they really were supposed to be must, finally, be how they actually turned out. Our struggles with acknowledging this simple truth linger at the root of many of our most enduring project difficulties. ...

“This elephant that not one of us has seen keeps me coming back for more, even though each project brings with it the struggles that come with every collective pursuit.

“Even though I am sure to meet my wall and once again question my intentions for being involved, I come back.

“Even though I will certainly struggle, as if for the first time, with my ethical responsibility to be a bad soldier within an unappreciative bureaucracy, I come back.

“Even though I will find myself wrestling with snakes, painfully learning all over again the self-preserving necessity of trusting and generosity, I come back.

“Even though forests will tangle with trees, and the resulting disorganization will try my patience all over again, I come back.

“You see, I might be able to help someone else find his or her project within this project—or someone might be able to help me find my own project there. We have an outside chance, maybe just a tiny chance, to create, again, together, that elephant, that timeless sense of coherence we find whenever we passionately pursue something as a community—so I keep coming back. Don’t you?

“May this elephant emerge whenever you engage.”