

Chapter 2 The Only Time You Should Say 'Sure' Is If You're Buying Deodorant

As you can see, the book started gently. In chapter 1 there was no new behaviour to adopt - there was just an idea you had to take away. Here, it's a little more demanding. There's something you need to stop doing.

PREDICTING THE FUTURE – IT'S A RISKY BUSINESS

Your boss calls you into his office, gathers up the pile of stuff and says, 'Congratulations, you're going to be leading the poison chalice project, and I'm sure it'll be a career-enhancing move for all of us. Oh, and by the way, we don't know much about this project, but it has to be done by this date, you'll have to do it with the team you've got and the budget's already been fixed.'

Or she says, 'Would you mind taking care of this? There's only a couple of hours work in it and I need it before you go home today.'

Taking on projects – as you do every day in work - is a risky business. It's risky whatever the size of the project – whether it's some mammoth undertaking all the way down to some seemingly inconsequential request.

It's risky because – if you think about it - you get asked to make a prediction of the future - can you do it by this date / for this budget / with these people? - and then make that prediction come true. Now, if any of us could actually do that we really wouldn't be doing it at work. Instead, we'd be down at the racetrack or spending our nights in casinos or buying lottery tickets.

If that wasn't bad enough – and I think you'll agree it is – we often get asked to make these predictions in a very strange way. Imagine this. Imagine your car was

acting up and you took it to the garage and what you said to the guy in the garage was, 'I don't know what's wrong with my car, but I'd like you to fix it in the next hour and it better only cost fifty euros / pounds /dollars.'

It would be a strange way to ask him to look at your car.

But what would be even stranger would be if he said, 'Sure'.

And when you came back an hour later and drove your car out of the garage, you'd be wondering what he did to your car? Did he do anything? Did he even look at it? Is the engine going to fall out or catch fire or explode?

And of course, in the setting of a garage, we couldn't even imagine such a stupid conversation.

But in our kinds of projects, such conversations happen all the time. They're routine. Somebody says, 'Here's the project. I don't know much about it but it has to be done by this date for this budget with these people. Good luck with that.'

And then everyone says, 'Sure'.

MISSILES – BALLISTIC AND CRUISE

The handing over of the project, as we've just described, is a dangerous moment. It's so dangerous that it's like having a missile fired at you.

There are two types of missile – the ballistic missile and the cruise missile. The ballistic missile is launched and we pick it up on our radar screens. The ballistic missile is the explicit handing over of the project as we described in the opening paragraphs.

But there's also the cruise missile – the sneaky one. It gets launched somewhere and suddenly - out of nowhere, it seems – it lands in our lap. Here's an

example of a cruise missile. You're at a meeting, say, and somebody asks you, 'How long do you think that would take?' If you're not careful, you'll think up an answer. And if you're not really, really careful, you could end up opening your mouth and making a commitment.

Whether the missile is ballistic or cruise, it's dangerous because it carries a warhead. But in our line of business the missile carries a particularly dangerous kind of warhead called the binary warhead. A binary warhead contains two things which, once they're kept apart, are harmless but mix them together and they're deadly.

In our case, these two things are

- The request itself – 'will you do the poison-chalice project?' is an example of a request, and
- The 'constraints'.

The constraints are the idea that even though they've asked you the question, 'How long will that take?' they already know the answer:

- The project must be finished by a certain date, or
- It must be done for a certain budget,
- It must be done with certain resourcing, or
- The scope of the project has already been fixed, or
- Some combination of these things.

Now if you try to deal with the request and the constraints at the same time, I hope you can see that potentially you could end up in a lot of trouble. Because, on the one hand, as you think about the date, you think about all the things you're going to have to do and all the time those things will take. Meanwhile the constraints are telling you that you're not going to get the time.

And you're thinking that you're going to need three highly skilled specialists for a certain part of your project. The constraints are telling you that you'll be lucky to get a man and a dog!

In almost every case, the constraints have a tendency to win the argument. And as a result we can end up committing to doing things that are

- Difficult to do
- Impossible to do
- Well beyond impossible (if such a place exists).

It has to be said that the #1 reason why projects fail is that they were never actually possible in the first place. Somebody said, 'Here's the project. It has to be done by this date or with these resources or for this budget', and everybody just said, 'Sure'.

'SURE' IS A FOUR LETTER WORD

So if you're going to run your projects successfully, the first thing you have to do is to stop this behaviour. From now on, when a project is handed to you, you're not going to say, 'Sure'. Instead you're going to do what the mechanic or the plumber or the doctor or the truck driver or the assistant in the clothes shop or any one of a million other 'normal' trades / industries / professions does, when asked to address a problem. They say, 'We'll take a look at it.' In other words they'll do an examination, come up with a diagnosis and then tell you what's possible and what's not.

This is exactly what you're going to do. Now, in all likelihood, the powers-that-be may be looking for *action* to break out straight away. Once you walk out of

your boss's office, (s)he may want to see meetings and brainstorming sessions and teleconferences and documents being written and people developing stuff and all the other paraphernalia of a live project. (S)he may even have uttered the immortal line, 'We don't have time to plan. Just go do it.'

It doesn't matter.

All you can say at this stage is, 'We'll take a look at it.' All you commit to is that you're going to look at the problem and see what's possible and what's not. And with that you walk out carrying the pile of stuff and turn your attention to chapter 3.

GO DO IT

Next time somebody hands you a project, instead of saying, 'Sure', say 'I'll take a look at it.'

When you do this for the first time, give yourself a reward afterwards - whatever you like, whenever you like to treat yourself.

After having done it for the first time and treated yourself, keep on doing it. Make it a habit. It's a good one.

PLANNING TIME TAKEN

A few second to say 'I'll take a look at it'. Negligible, to all intents and purposes.