

# WORKING THROUGH A TRULY DIFFICULT ASSIGNMENT— KILLING A \$100 MILLION PROJECT OF A WELL-LIKED SENIOR PEER—AND NAVIGATING THE ORGANIZATIONAL POLITICS

Fran Grigsby is truly talented. She has held important management positions in a number of companies and now runs her own consulting firm. Some years ago, she moved from DEC to “Commuco,” and soon found herself faced with a really tricky task in an organization with a tough culture. She was asked to head a project that most observers considered doomed, but it had been started by a respected senior manager who was still around and invested in it, and she had to figure out how to proceed. Here she recounts her experience, and what she learned about surviving organizational politics. Some of what she says may make you uncomfortable, but she managed to survive and do well, and it is worth learning from her. You might decide, as she did, that you don’t want to play in such an arena, but this will help you figure out how to understand and use politics if you want to.

I was recruited out of DEC to be VP of Program Management for the information systems group at Commuco. This group was involved in everything that was not telephones and pagers. I was promised that if I did this functional job for a while, I would get to run a business. One month later, the head of info systems was moved; the new one reorganized the group and gave me one of the four resulting businesses to run: Project SWITCH.

## **History of Project SWITCH**

It had been going as a project for four years, 200+ engineers and marketing folks, designing a complex, high-end, corporate, multipurpose telephone company (telco) switch. The business was being driven by the customers of telcos. Commuco had been oriented to the individual consumer, and this was one of very few really big projects for big companies. Commuco only knew wide area networks; it didn’t know the kinds of companies that were the telco customers.

This was a huge project, which was failing miserably at the time; they had already spent \$100 Million on it. The accepted truth around the company, which I heard as I got to know people, was that its software design was so badly planned and executed that you couldn’t test if you were doing it right as you went along. You couldn’t chunk it to test any subsystems. That’s purely bad design. No software project is so complex it can’t be divided up to see how subsystems are going; otherwise you have to get to the end to find out, and that’s too late.

The project had been the brainchild of the Advanced Development VP, my peer, a brilliant guy, who had persuaded the company to let him run the software side of development. In general, advanced development

people don't know how to do production code, but he wanted to. It was both ill-designed software by people who didn't know how to do it, and money hemorrhaging at a time when the company couldn't afford to.

### **Project SWITCH Becomes a Business Reporting to Fran; The Political Challenges**

I was asked to take over this project, which was made a business, with all the elements for the first time under one manager, me. Those engineers, including the advanced development group, were transferred to me, and they also pulled marketing in. Plus there were political issues: there had been four years of hype, how wonderful the product was, how it would be the flagship for the company, visibility to the CEO in waiting. The VP of Advanced Development had built his life on it, so all his fans in the company wanted it to succeed. The cash cow product at the time was turning more competitive, so there was pressure to succeed.

It was classic; a new boss who is pretty sure the project is a loser gives it to me, both of us were new. I should have said "No, just send me back to DEC." But they gave the nasty work to the new kid.

It was clear I was new kid on the block in an old boy company, which was so old boy in style it took pride in "knuckle dragging"—old-fashioned male king-of-the-gorillas behavior. Since I was taking over his baby, I knew I'd have to do things the advanced development guy wouldn't appreciate. To counteract all the affection in my group for the VP of Advanced Development, I realized I needed to work the internal power base, so whatever I did I had some power support. I needed corporate level political cover.

It was clear to me from the beginning, though never said explicitly, that I would have to kill it. People in other parts of the company would tell me behind closed doors that the software code was so bad that to succeed you would have to throw it away, rewrite it from scratch, which would make it two years late for the market, so you will have to cancel it, even though \$100 Million was already spent. Everyone but the Advanced Development VP said that. He thought that if we just let them keep working and maybe they will come up with something.

So my first official task was to evaluate the project and decide what to do with it. That was actually fallacious because it was so clear it was bad, so I knew I needed political cover, and needed alternatives for the future, because if it were cancelled, we had so many engineers on hand. The question would be what to do with them. This was a healthy time for IT in general, so hiring good people was a challenge. Since after canceling the project we were going to identify new businesses to enter, I hated to lose these great skills we might need again.

I realized I was in trouble. It was a “Why-not-just-go-fall-off-a-cliff” kind of assignment. But I was challenged, “I can do anything,” I thought foolishly. I did not worry that he would undercut my decision, he was a logical and trustworthy person. However I did feel that, in the eyes of the engineers in the organization, I would be seen as the adversary of this popular manager. This could hurt my ability to attract people for new ventures.

First I had to get internal support: I had to wean my own staff away from other loyalties. They all had long histories with this group and Commuco. I had to convince them there was something in it for them from working with me. I gave them my personal commitment to manage them well and tell them the truth about the future of the group, and if it didn't work, offered them the promise of exciting new markets, interesting new technological challenges (for the engineers), the opportunity to identify opportunities and do an internal start-up. I can't say I completely converted all of them, but my strategy was to do as much as possible to give them a chance to be managed and productive. They had never been either. There was a payoff to them from getting work done, since as professionals they want to be productive. I gave them lots of product stuff to do which had nothing to do with this project. I gave them lots of external contact (since Commuco had been internally oriented); for example, I spent a lot on consultants to provide professional education, pull knowledge in, sent them to conferences, and so on. That provided benefits for them. I also tried to hire a good engineering manager who had worked for me before. Someone with good engineering practices and who I could depend on. (Unfortunately, I couldn't get the ones I tried to get).

Really important: I tried to have fun, like crazy. The stress was off the map; because of it we did all kinds of things. E.g., we gave insane birthday day presents, like rubber chickens, top 10 birthday lists, had celebrations for no reason at all, decorated conference rooms, spread Nerf balls, foam bats and things like that around, give them a reason to laugh, which we did a lot. We had to laugh because of so much stress. That worked really well; we lost only 2 to 8 staff during two really hard years. (And I still work with two of them on a regular basis, because we became close).

### **Building Corporate Political Support**

The job was to run and evaluate the project at the same time. I thought only way to evaluate it was to use Commuco corporate people to do it.. If I went outside the company, they would have no credibility. Yet I needed evaluators with some distance. I went to my boss's boss's boss. I asked him to assemble us a team. He put together a competent cross-functional team from all over. (They were also politically savvy and well-connected). After several visits to the project, they made the recommendation to cancel, which politically was very useful.

Also, I made the rounds, took several trips to talk to people at headquarters –including the soon-to-be CEO– about what we were doing, how we were going about it, what the criteria would be. My message was, ‘my value add is being a really good manager (not a politician)’, so I went around being clean and straight. Yes, this was a political pose, but it was all I had to offer. I couldn’t ask anyone to run interference because I didn’t even know who to ask. I hadn’t been around the company for years to have a network already built to call on.

It went really well. When I cancelled the project, there was very little corporate repercussion. I had talked to everyone, so they knew we were thinking about it. But built in to the assignment was that it was already in big trouble, we’d spent a fortune, but had already announced the product and done a market launch! I couldn’t take that back, so I was doing the right thing paving the way, because there would be a big load of bricks falling when we ended it. There was the Corporate PR department to get involved, dealing with the press, all the groups in the company that were designing complementary products, etc. So the real impact was large, though I did what I could. I didn’t get much fallout from the decision. I got a wave of emails, mostly from middle managers whose products were connected to our products, or who respected the Advanced Development VP, so they thought it a shame and that we should have found something else. But I got no peer or corporate flack.

I was worried about the Advanced Development VP’s reactions but he laid that to rest. It became clear that I did not need to worry about his actively undermining my actions. I met regularly with him, first to familiarize myself with the project and his views about it, then to inform him about my decisions, then to jointly plan who would be laid off and which engineers would end up in his organization and mine. He was obviously sad about the project, and probably embarrassed since the failure had happened on his watch, but he did not talk openly about this. He retained his job as the organization still needed Advanced Development.

What to do with the people if we cancelled the project? Our assignment was to get into corporate networking though the company was in other products. We had to find a profitable opportunity to use them. The last thing we wanted to do was lose the hard-to-find talent. At the time there was new network technology (ATM), so networking was the obvious place. To keep the group productive and find new business, I made working teams to examine possible new businesses. We looked at ATM switches, adapter cards, servers with bits of old engineering from SWITCH, plus two other possibilities. We ran a tightly managed process with deadlines and milestones. That worked really well to get the team feeling they were not just doing failure work. The fact was that there were just no projects to use all 200 people. So when we cancelled, I had to lay people off. I wanted to do it once and for all. Classic: quick and clean, but it still had a huge impact. First, I laid off 60 percent of the group.

It never makes sense to keep paying people if you don't have a job for them. I had laid off many people at Digital so my skin was pretty thick by this point. However, many of these engineers had poured heart and soul into this project and I empathized with their disappointment at seeing years of their work down the drain (i.e., not getting to the market).

I never have been under so much stress. I wanted it to go perfectly. It was a hero thing. I wanted it all to work, but it couldn't. I wanted to personally make up for four years of overspending, while no one had done anything but look the other way, but it was contrary to fact, and I just couldn't. Everyone knew it was the right decision, but the impact of breaking up the team, the flagship product for this group, connected widely in the company. There still is an "exSWITCH" mailing list (I'm just about the only non-engineer on it), so it was a tight group. No forward momentum could counteract all this, though I was trying. Everyone in the group got it; I didn't get hate mail from them. Not long after, (in a kind of *deus ex machina*) the vice president for advanced development went on vacation with his wife and daughter, and he and the daughter were found dead, no one knew why or what happened. It was like a tangible symbol of how everything had fallen in on itself in this project.

His death made it harder to retain people, even those who didn't work directly for him, because he was the technology thought leader for all the businesses in our group. So I had done all the right stuff, new projects were going on, I'd given back money that was otherwise being wasted, people were as energized as can be, but there was so much negative about the project work itself, and our inability to find successful new businesses, that it was stressful and sad.

Here I made a major influence mistake (in Commuco terms). There were a few odd businesses looking for homes, clearly not viable as money makers, but popular with senior people. I turned down the chance to run one, which was a mistake internally (though I was honest in saying it wouldn't make money). The other businesses didn't have enough political support to carry through the corporate rolling downsizing that was going on by that time. To protect people in the group, I should have taken these popular businesses that would have been supported though they were not very profitable. Eventually the group was reorganized, and projects were cancelled, including mine. Had I chosen politically popular businesses to run, the group would still exist, working on some possible projects. All of us had to go find new jobs. (After three years, I left, because I was offered jobs in the headquarters city, and didn't want to move there).

What burned me out was dealing with the old boys—who thought good management was cursing you out. I saw I was so much the wrong kind of person for that environment. What I mean by Old boys: confrontation, when in doubt, fight, the management practice of having managers

present to be excoriated in front of the group. Whenever I or my group came in to present to my manager, it was “how many holes in the presentation can you find?”—“I’m bigger and badder than you,” throwing weight around—a four letter word environment, bullying. At a big cross-company management meeting I attended, that was the average behavior. I realized it wasn’t just my manager, it was the culture of the whole place. It’s odd, because the CEO wasn’t like that; he’s intellectual, polite—and you usually think of it as coming from the top. I have been told that the culture was from a very successful acquired group, which meant that people were pulled out of there and seeded around, as was my boss. So maybe it was the culture only the three years I was around.

They certainly had no idea what to do with strong women. They didn’t wonder if I was strong or tough enough, but my own manager was never comfortable with me. I was still female. But I passed the test, because I was offered jobs at headquarters. From the corporate point of view, I was respected and valued when the business closed down.

There are two components to political savvy: I think a lot about constituencies. Who are the groups and categories I’m dealing with? I do continual sorting in my head, whatever I’m working on. The strategy is churning in my head, whatever is going on. It’s like a mental map; I do it naturally. All my life I have enjoyed this kind of categorizing, like working in operations, where you are putting things in circles and boxes. I’m creating plans for each constituency.

For example, I made sure that the evaluation team that was formed were connected, long-time Commucons, who got credibility from who they were, so when they said something, it was given credibility.

Savvy is also personal, 1:1, being emotionally intelligent, so you always think of what their interests are, and their reactions to what you are doing. I know I am strong at that.

Also, you have to know which way the wind is blowing, doing things that will put you in a good light. For example, realizing that this is a junk project that will never make money, but VPs like it and want it, so do it to preserve the group. It’s knowing how to make yourself look good independent of reality. Or for example, noticing external things, like what category of product is getting a lot of press these days. (That’s how *SWITCH* got started; there was a wave of excitement in the press). It’s a gut sense, hard to say. There is a style of presenting things as a manager, (you can think of it as creating your own wind), personal PR, that takes a project or opportunity and feels totally comfortable with discussing business plans, futures—where everyone knows the plans are not literally true, but if you have the guts and balls to say I will make it into a \$5 billion business, that gains respect, because you are willing to say, “I can make the wind blow!”

## LESSONS FROM FRAN GRIGSBY'S EXPERIENCE

- Credibility is invaluable; if you have it from your previous work, preserve it, and if you have to acquire it, look for difficult jobs with visibility (and deliver).

The higher the level you are operating at, the harder it is to tell if you really know what you are doing. Technology, project complexity, and the length of time it takes to achieve results make it hard to determine who is right. Thus past performance—your reputation—is extremely important. It doesn't guarantee a lack of opposition, but it does help gain latitude and some support. It sounds obvious, but do good work as early and often as you can, so that you can acquire some of the armor of credibility.

If you are new to the organization, however, your past performance may not be worth much, and in some insular places, may even count against you. So you need to figure out how to gain early credibility.

One way is to do a great job with something that has been a problem to the organization, especially when others haven't had the courage to deal with it. That means there will be risk in taking it on, but if you are successful, you will dramatically increase your credibility, as Fran did. You may not be as lucky as one young man we know well who took a first job where there was a huge mess in procedures that had been unsuccessfully wrestled with for months, and using computer techniques he had just learned at school, he solved it in a few days. Instant hero! But even without that kind of good luck, you can seek out difficulties for insiders that as an outsider you have a useful perspective on.

You may run into the kinds of political barriers that Fran found, so another way you can demonstrate credibility is to understand that the existing culture may have concerns about whatever you are doing and ask a lot of questions about how things work. Not only does that give you valuable information, but the very act of knowing enough to inquire and then doing so helps make you more credible. After all, to politically minded others, it is only natural and prudent to check out the scene.

- Keep your antennae up, especially when you are relatively new to the organization.

Fran talks about how she was constantly monitoring the environment, which was at the least, important for survival. It helped her know where to focus, and where to be extra careful. (In football, players in the open field are told to "have your head on a swivel," to avoid being blindsided by a vicious hit; that's not a bad image for operating in a political organization).

- Be prepared to compromise when it would preserve larger or longer term goals.

Only you can decide when to back off from a dearly held position, but in most cases, that will have to happen some of the time if you want to succeed. It is hard to balance your vision and principles with tactical necessity, and perseverance is important, but don't get into a "my way or the highway" mentality. Politicians usually have figured out how to get along with even ideological opponents and know that they have to give a little to get what they care about. Good politicians are natural exchangers who preserve relationships despite disputes.

- Work the network, constantly planting ideas or potential plans and building your connections.

Working the network follows logically from the need for good information about important stakeholders and for good relationships. Furthermore, ideas that if implemented will force people to change something usually need time for digestion. What sounds frightening or radical at first, can become a lot more comfortable with repetition and slowly acquired bits of information.

- If what you have to do is personally unacceptable, get out as soon as you can find a better alternative.

Even though Fran was successful, ambitious, and quite good at getting things done in a tough, high-pressure, political organization, she didn't want to continue with that kind of life. Some people wouldn't want to work in a quiet, pleasant environment, finding it too sleepy, while others would experience belonging to any large organization as too pressured. Find what suits you.