

# ***WORKING AT WARP SPEED***



*The New Rules for  
Project Success  
in a Sped-up World*

***BARRY FLICKER***

An Excerpt From

***Working at Warp Speed:  
The New Rules for Project Success in a Sped-Up World***

by Barry Flicker

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## Preface

It's like a bad joke. The more labor- and time-saving devices we produce, the faster things go and the busier we get. This is what I've called "working at warp speed." One major drawback to all this hurry is that it encourages machinelike behavior. That is, we rely on the speed of pre-programmed responses to crank out ever more tasks in ever less time. In a sense, that's the punch line of the joke—we seem to be getting nowhere fast. What's worse, something very essential has gotten lost in the process. This book looks at the performance of project teams to discover just how high the cost of this neglect has become, what we can do about it, and why taking action now is so important.

For twelve years, clients have used my Project Master Class to rescue their teams from the depths of despair (or slipping deadlines, whichever came first). The problems they have confronted are predictable, and I have collected them into a kind of "greatest hits" list featuring the ten most common complaints. I use this Warp Speed Barrier Checklist (see page xiii) to begin our work with a simple question.

## PREFACE

“Which of these barriers, if any, do you struggle with?”

Invariably the reply is “All of them!” People feel overloaded, saddled with unrealistic deadlines and constantly expanding scope. They do a poor job defining the goal and planning. Then they become buried in constant firefighting, miscommunication, and conflict while trying to straighten it all out.

I believe you could walk into any company and ask any employee, at random, if they experience any of the barriers on this list and you will likely get the same reply—they struggle with them all.

This universality can surprise people who still think of project management as something reserved for NASA engineers or contractors and high-stakes developers. Most of us have yet to realize how thoroughly project thinking has permeated every aspect of our lives. Have you ever remodeled your home or helped plan a major event like a wedding or fiftieth birthday party? How many times did you have to improvise in the face of an unexpected crisis? That was classic project management. Run a political campaign, make a movie, or organize a group backpacking trip, and you’re contributing to a project. In fact, any time you need to get a group of people to complete anything by a deadline you’re relying on project fundamentals. Law firms, ad agencies, hospitals, architects, meeting planners, publishers, social activists, you name it—the warp speed barriers confound us all, and we improvise our own version of project management solutions to overcome them.

But why reinvent the wheel when tackling this list of chronic frustrations? Much of the work has already been done, and the results have been collected here, compressed into the pages of this little book. How is that possible? Frantic problems often have simple solutions, as when, after a desperate search, we find our missing glasses perched on the top of our head.

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In much the same way, our search for relief from the chaotic pressure of the 24/7 warp speed world results in some obvious but surprising conclusions. The solutions are frequently counterintuitive. The source of the problem is not what we think and often turns up where we least expect to find it. By the end of this book, however, I promise you will discover a set of simple steps that will enable you to find relief from every single one of the Warp Speed Barrier complaints.

Taking you through a simulated training is the easiest way to demonstrate the genesis of this people-centered approach. To this end, I have created a fictional project team. Although the characters are composites, the problems they address are all too real. So, too, are their observations and objections. For instance, the letter from Ellen, in the final chapter, is based on actual correspondence. The behaviors I describe are things that I have watched people re-create day in and day out for over a decade. In other words, I have attempted to make this virtual world as much like the real one as possible.

Some early reviewers suggested that the characters seemed too open to these new ideas and that they should present more resistance. In fact, for the sake of both interest and clarity, I have invented far more contention in this simulated classroom than I have ever encountered in the real one. The reason for this lack of resistance, I think, stems from the fact that I do not ask people to take anything on faith. We run experiments, observe the results, and, together, draw logical conclusions. Sometimes the results are surprising. If you find any of the outcomes suspect, try running the experiments yourself. I'd love to know what you discover.

For myself, this twelve-year journey of discovery has been a dream come true. I have so many people to thank. At the very beginning, Kelle Olwyler counseled me to

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become a corporate shaman despite my inability to find that category in the "Help Wanted" section. Tom Pinkson, a real shaman, helped with the inner healing that preceded the outer work. Elaine Hamilton, wherever you are, thanks so much for my first gig. How I got a master consultant like Ron Tilden to mentor me, I'll never know. Ron, none of this would have been possible without you. Dick Miller of Western Learning Systems and Peller Marion kept me working and paying the bills while I learned the ropes. Without my friend and virtual partner, Sue Smith of Effective Training Associates and her incredible staff, I could not possibly be where I am today. To all my extraordinary clients from whom I have learned so much, I can't thank you enough. That goes double for Steve Piersanti and the entire Berrett-Koehler team. Without you, this book would never have happened. In the course of its development, so many extraordinary friends and associates, too numerous to mention individually, gave me the benefit of their insights. Your guidance and encouragement have been indispensable. Most of all, I want to express my love and appreciation to my wife Sharon who kept me going, gave me invaluable feedback through endless rewrites, and has made my life heaven on earth. To all of you, and the Great Mystery from which we have received the miracle of life itself, words are wholly inadequate to express the gratitude I feel.

Barry Flicker  
December 15, 2001  
Woodacre, California



## **The Warp Speed Barrier Checklist**

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- 1.** Everyone enters the project **running on overload**.
- 2.** Rushing leads to **poorly defined goals** at the project's inception.
- 3.** **Unrealistic completion dates** leave the team feeling they've been "set up to fail."
- 4.** A sense of urgency encourages **poor communication**.
- 5.** Feeling the crunch, the **planning effort is reduced or skipped** entirely.
- 6.** **Other departments fail to support the project** creating delays.
- 7.** Continued breakdowns trigger **blame and finger-pointing**.
- 8.** **Scope expands** as customers request additional features.
- 9.** **Endless meetings** to sort it all out lack focus, run too long, rehash the same territory, are dominated by a few people, and fail to produce or complete action items.
- 10.** **Constant firefighting** consumes ever more time and effort.



# **Introduction**

## **Warp Speed in a Nutshell**

Are you working at warp speed—too busy to plan, too rushed to communicate in anything more than e-mail snippets, and too overloaded to read all the e-mail you get? Do overlooked details lead to broken commitments and project problems?

Imagine what your life would be like if you could eliminate the overload; alleviate the struggle to meet “unrealistic” deadlines; reduce the constant firefighting, poor planning, and ineffective communication; and slash the endless time wasted in meetings trying to sort it all out.

It could happen! If only you could get everyone on your team fired up about your project, committed to its success, and pointed in the same direction. But how?

You’re about to meet five people who are asking this same question. They need to find an answer—fast. They have overpromised and underdelivered on their projects. Their customers are unhappy, and their time is about to run out. They feel discouraged. At times it seems the harder they try, the worse things get. If they can’t turn things around in six months, their next project will be finding work!

Can anything really make a difference? They are skeptical. That is until they see for themselves, through a startling experiment, that they have been solving the wrong problem. Perhaps you have too?

Reading *Working at Warp Speed* could change the way you work forever. It's distilled twelve years of project breakthroughs in leading high-tech companies, top universities, and government institutions into four hands-on rules that can deliver immediate results. These four rules are like the angel in Michelangelo's block of marble—to find them we have only to chip away everything unnecessary. The chipping away takes some time and effort, but the results are well worth it. You will find that they dispel the myth that project management must be boring and highly technical. What's more, they show how anyone can take advantage of this extraordinary system to lighten the workload and ignite the passion of any team.



## **Warp Speed Poisoning**

**S**o much to do and so little time—it's the mantra of warp speed. Whenever we depend on others to help us deliver results by a deadline, which is really what projects are all about, the problem grows worse. It can feel like climbing up a wall of sand: the harder we dig in, the more quickly the ground crumbles away beneath us. Working this way can rob us of our joy, undermine a marriage, and destroy our health. Many of us have been working this way for so long it may seem inevitable. It's not. In fact, this way of working is unsustainable. That's why Christi and her team have asked to participate in my Project Master Class. They desperately need some help discovering a way out.

As I prepared the flip charts for our morning session, Christi Qwik whisked into the training room. From her red hair to the New York clip in her delivery, she was a woman who lived and breathed at warp speed, and, in her typical no-nonsense fashion, she wanted to get right down to business. As always she spoke in tones that were crisp and upbeat. But just beneath the surface you could feel the desperation.

“The constantly accelerating pace is killing us,” she had told me quite frankly during our first interview.

Christi faced a crisis. As director of information technologies, she needed to “whip her project teams into shape”—fast. Her people maintained the electronic nervous system of the entire organization, but miscommunication and constant firefighting were bringing them closer to nervous breakdown. Work quality had fallen, while repeatedly blown deadlines had become the norm. Key contributors complained about impossible workloads, unrealistic schedules, and unhealthy levels of stress. Customers, both internal and external, were unhappy and growing impatient.

The source of the problem, however, proved slippery to define. During prior interviews, every employee gave a different explanation for what was wrong.

According to Brenda, one of Christi’s top project managers, many of the problems began with endlessly shifting objectives demanded by both customers and senior management. Where, in her perpetually overloaded schedule, did they expect her to fit these additional requirements? She did the best she could by pushing herself harder and harder, but this strategy was quickly burning her out. It seemed like the faster she’d go, the slower things went. Somehow she needed more efficient production from her team—especially Al.

Al had a different perspective. He felt Christi created unrealistic deadlines that bore little relationship to the actual work that needed to be accomplished. And Brenda, by accepting these assignments without pushing back more effectively, was setting the team up for failure. He also complained that he rarely had a clear sense of how his task assignments fit into the larger goal. When I asked him if he had shared these concerns with Brenda, he laughed, “She’d never listen.”

Dave worked on many of the same projects Al did, but his analysis of the problem couldn't have been more different. Finger pointing only made matters worse, as far as Dave was concerned. The combination of a constantly shifting economy and exploding technological growth seemed to make the current crisis inevitable, leaving little that anyone could really do about it. He just tried to do his job without asking a lot of questions that would only eat into Brenda's already overloaded schedule.

While Dave accepted the status quo, Ellen was angry. As the team's technical superstar, she questioned whether the time had come for her to make a career move. She felt trapped by her success and the endless game of "catch-up." The more she accomplished, the more she was asked to do. Furthermore, she feared that the more dependent the department became on her efforts, the more reluctant they would be to let her move on to new challenges.

Now, as I sat with Christi and her team, I wanted them to see these challenges in a larger context.

"Would it surprise you to know that this same list of frustrations has been driving people in organizations crazy for over fifty years?" I asked them. "Imagine that. Despite all of our spectacular technological advances, your list of frustrations keeps hanging on with the persistence of the common cold. In fact, the faster the technology drives us, the more pronounced the symptoms seem to get. It's a condition I call 'warp speed poisoning,' and I believe that the five of you have named just about every condition on the list."

I then projected a copy of the Warp Speed Barrier Checklist up on the screen so they could see for themselves. I have compiled this list of chronic complaints into a tool I call the Warp Speed Barrier Checklist (see earlier illustration) to lighten the tone a bit. I shared with them my David Letterman-style version called "Top Ten Reasons Why the Job Didn't Get Done":



## **Top Ten Reasons Why the Job Didn't Get Done**

- 10.** Were still in the meeting phase.  
**Too Many Meetings**
- 9.** I'll get to it as soon as I extinguish the flames.  
**Constant Firefighting**
- 8.** I was constrained by the 24-hour-a-day limit.  
**Scope Keeps Expanding**
- 7.** I felt I needed additional criticism.  
**Blame & Finger-pointing**
- 6.** The rest of my team had a golf emergency.  
**Lack of Support**
- 5.** We didn't think it would turn out like this, either. **Poor Planning**
- 4.** I thought, "Are you crazy?" was a health question. **Miscommunication**
- 3.** You wanted it when?!  
**Unrealistic Deadlines**
- 2.** We might have done better if we knew what it was. **Poorly Defined Goals**

*And the number one reason why the job didn't get done:*

- 1.** The doctor said he's still recovering from the last project. **Overload**

"I'm not sure I get the warp speed part," said Christi. "Like you said, these problems have been around forever. Sure the technology can be a pain in the butt, but it also makes us much more productive. Without it we couldn't compete."

"Right. It's a double-edged sword, isn't it? Going faster leverages our strengths, but it also increases our vulnerability. Think about what happens when you hit a speed bump going sixty miles per hour. At warp speed, minor annoyances become potentially catastrophic disruptions. It has wiped out our margin for error, making us more susceptible to failure and exaggerating the damage when it occurs."

"It sounds like we're trapped," said Dave. "Obviously there's no going back."

"The trap can be sprung if we can identify who's setting the snare and why they're doing it," I told him. "Let's stick with the warp speed barriers for a moment. Who's causing all these problems?"

As they considered this question, I quickly looked through the notes I had taken during my earlier interviews with each of them. I knew, somewhere, they had already provided the answer.

## **The Idiots Out There**

"When we spoke earlier," I said, referring to my notes, "each of you seemed able to identify the culprits. The list included out-of-touch upper management, uncooperative coworkers, and overly demanding customers."

"Don't forget unreliable vendors," Brenda added.

"While you're at it," said Christi, "why don't you include the geniuses in accounting who squeeze our budget and then demand increased functionality?"



## **BREAKDOWNS**

**At warp speed,**  

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**minor annoyances**  

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**become potentially**  

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**catastrophic**  

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**disruptions.**



"That's an impressive list," I said. "It seems like the real cause of all of these problems is the 'idiots out there.' If only these problem people would get their act together, much of our grief would go away. Right?"

Sheepish smiles seemed to indicate we had struck a responsive chord.

"The good news about this explanation," I continued, "is that the problem is somebody else's fault. What's the bad news?"

"We're somebody else's idiot," said Al. That got a laugh.

"We also can't do much about it," Ellen added.

"That's right—other people are not very interested in having us fix them," I agreed.

"Especially if we treat them like idiots," said Dave.

"So how about if we explore the opposite hypothesis—that it's something we're doing, or failing to do, that triggers warp speed poisoning. Of course, the bad news here is that we now own the problem. The good news is, the more squarely we can place ourselves at the root of the problem, the more power we have to change things."

"That's a cute slogan," said Al, "but in practice, I don't buy it. It's not my fault that marketing people make impossible promises to customers with no real sense of what it takes to get a product out the door or that senior management changes priorities every fifteen minutes."

"I agree that it's not your fault, but what if there was some adjustment you could make in your own behavior that could prevent those things from standing in the way of your success? Would you be willing to make that change?" I asked him.

"It depends on what you want me to change," said Al.

"I don't want you to change anything. The real question is, Are you willing to change behaviors that decrease your effectiveness? To help answer that question, we'll run an experiment, and you can assess for yourself in what



## **RESPONSIBILITY**

**The more squarely**

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**ourselves at the root**

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**of the problem,**

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**the more power we have**

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**to change things.**

ways, if any, your choices perpetuate the symptoms on the Warp Speed Barrier Checklist. It's a game that will require the five of you to complete a simple project in fifteen minutes."

Al expressed some skepticism about the value of "playing games" while fires burned all around them and wanted to know what "revelation" was going to occur in fifteen minutes that had eluded him during his professional career.

"Given how long you've been at this, Al, I wouldn't be surprised if you've forgotten more about project management than I'll ever know. But obviously something's not working or we wouldn't be having this conversation. If you'll risk fifteen minutes of your time, I can guarantee that you will be shocked at what you discover."

"OK," he conceded reluctantly. "You've got fifteen minutes."

Before moving on, I wanted to make sure that everyone had grasped the major points we had covered. We summarized them as follows:

1. There is a list of ten complaints that have been frustrating people in organizations for fifty years and that we have consolidated into the Warp Speed Barrier Checklist.
2. Most people blame these problems on the "idiots out there," which leaves them innocent but helpless.
3. Therefore, we want to explore the opposite hypothesis—that there is something we are doing or something that we are failing to do that is keeping this list of barriers locked in place.
4. We make this shift in thinking because the more squarely we can place ourselves at the root of the problem, the more quickly and dramatically we can change things.

5. To test this hypothesis, we will run a series of experiments that provide immediate feedback about our real-world predicament.
6. In the past, these barriers may have been tolerated, but, at warp speed, these minor annoyances can become potentially catastrophic disruptions.

We were now going to demonstrate why and how this occurs by playing the Project Game. Only through direct experience can we really appreciate the value of the four rules for project success, and the Project Game would set the stage for our discovering what they are.

this material has been excerpted from

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