



Penny's Predicament

After months of relentless effort, Penny finally was allowed a couple of days rest. The bid had been tough - late nights, tight deadlines, shifting requirements, difficult stakeholders - but successful. Their business had now been down selected by the customer, and they started the arduous process of agreeing the formal contract and mobilising the project.

In fact, all the team were given a long weekend to recuperate and when they returned to the office, the announcement was waiting **Penny was officially appointed Project Manager** for the high-profile project she had helped to win.



As she entered the open-plan office, **Brilliant Brian**, the charismatic self-absorbed narcissistic project sponsor, clapped his hands and declared loudly, “Congratulations, Penny! Just the person to make this happen”. A ripple of polite applause followed. Penny smiled, trying to suppress the fatigue still lingering but also feeling elated. Brian then said, “Let’s setup a one-to-one later, shall we?”

Keen to get started, Penny reached out to the bid team, the people who knew the proposal inside out. But to her surprise, many had already been reallocated by **Storm**, the formidable Engineering Director who never let her people rest on one project for long. Emails bounced back, diaries seemed full, and when she finally reached one of the engineers, the message was short and simple, “Sorry, Penny, Storm’s moved me onto the next big tender.” The bid had barely cooled, and the people who built it were gone. In fact, the real work of agreeing a formal contract was still to be completed and this customer always kept a ‘Spare’ in case of trouble.

Stakeholder Maze

Trying to regain control and seek support, Penny sent a polite message to schedule her promised one-to-one with **Brilliant Brian**—but his EA replied that he was “unavailable this week” due to “strategic offsites.” He could however do a telephone call the following Thursday afternoon but only for 15 minutes, whilst between flights.

Then came the second twist: **The Gatekeeper**, the long-serving departmental guardian known for absorbing projects, invited her in for a “*friendly chat*.” Penny had learned enough to know that in his world, *friendly* meant *something different*. The Gatekeeper mentioned that he had discussed where this project should sit with Brian who had apparently intimated ‘Wherever it needs to be’.

Before she could respond, **Slider** and the **Script** both asked for separate meetings to “understand the project’s needs.” Penny sensed a brewing territorial game, each wanting clarity on their own roles before helping with resources. **Mr Know it all** had appeared and offered help in front of everyone and suggested she kept a desk aside for him in the delivery area.

Pressure Builds

Meanwhile, the **chairperson of the pre-mobilization gateway review** requested an update and a detailed plan for completion. The **Finance team** wanted a go-live date for their forecasts, and **Comms** team were asking when they could make a public announcement. The potential suppliers wanted to discuss next steps, and the remaining few members of the bid team needed leadership.

Everyone wanted something from Penny.

The project itself was **strategically critical to the group's future**, one of several major milestones this year. Its success, or failure would be highly visible and could tarnish reputations.

Finding Her Ground

Penny sat in her office late that evening, surrounded by notes and empty coffee cups. She could feel the weight of expectation. The easy option would be to chase tasks, answer emails, drown in requests and appear busy. Penny resisted the urge to firefight or scream and looked out of the window. It was raining and Penny resisted the urge to think about something happening to her parade.

Fighting back the panic and the overwhelming Impostor syndrome, Penny knew better. This wasn't just about Gantt charts, gate reviews, suppliers and risks, it was about **stakeholders**. If she was going to deliver this project, she needed to build a network, gain trust, and get everyone aligned behind a shared vision. The next few days would be about listening, influencing, and quietly reshaping the organisational landscape she had found herself in.

Who you gonna call?



Penny messaged her mentor, the person who helped project professionals and who had led her APM PFQ and PMQ courses. She felt a little like “Princess Leia calling Obi-Wan”. To her surprise, a reply appeared a few minutes later, “Hi Penny, what’s up?”

They held a teams call, and Penny explained the situation and that she just needed some help. She outlined the predicament, never mentioning the detail of the project once, it seems to be able about people, politics and context.

The mentor listened, smiled and said OK, we’ve got this, here’s what I suggest:

1. **Understand your stakeholders**, create a **communications plan** and **implement it**
2. **Follow a 4-step plan:**
 - Understand the project and its strategic fit
 - Hold 1-2-1s with key players
 - Build a shared **vision**
 - Integrate this into **pre-mobilisation plans**
3. **Analyse the projects complexity** – look at the Cynefin Framework
4. **Re-run the PESTLE** from the bid phase, focus internally as well and look at SWOT.
5. **Draft a Project Charter** for visibility, alignment and buy in

6. **Plan resources**, assuming availability, but **capture the risks and suggested the pre mortem method for accountability and inclusivity**
7. Stay out of politics, it will drown you, rise above it
8. Lead discussions with your resource owners, build alliances, create trust, and be seen to do the right thing
9. Get your sponsor on board
10. Remember success will drag the players in, 'If you deliver this, they will come'.

Try not to show frustration, it can be seen as a sign of weakness and remember if you argue with seasoned players, they will take you down to their level and beat you with experience.

Her mentor suggested a follow up call in a couple of weeks or whenever Penny needed help.

Meetings, bloody meetings



Penny set up a face to face with the Gatekeeper in a conference room near the coffee shop, a neutral, quiet place where they wouldn't be disturbed. The Gatekeeper started his usual preamble, around synergies, amortisation, leveraging off experience and career development. In fact, he seemed quite bored, like reading from a script. He reminded Penny of the snake in the Jungle book cartoon with the swirling eyes or a scene from Little Britain, "Look

into my eyes" ...

At the end of his 10-minute monologue, Penny simply reminded the Gatekeeper that the project needed to "Stand on its own as a salient initiative," as it was part of the new strategy and documented in the bid. It is on the board's monthly review cycle and is key to new markets, any change must be agreed with them I'm afraid, said Penny and got up to leave.

The Gatekeeper looked flabbergasted, but kept his cool, he still believed his time would come.

Then, Penny set up a joint meeting with **Slider** and **The Script**.



The Script outlined the lengthy recruitment process: internal advertising, monthly panels, if unsuccessful then external through key suppliers, expect 6 to 8 months for candidates, longer if they have a lengthy notice period. The Script rolled out diagram after diagram, flow charts, decision points and templates to use. It had clearly become a major cottage industry, and the Script knew the exact pathways and routes through it. Slider was quiet he'd seen it all before, new PMs

trying to get their projects off the ground and the Script's long-winded speech, justifying her role.

Penny proposed parallel workstreams internal and external resourcing routes, fast track internal moves, Slider supported this logic, but the script was unmoved. "You've can't short cut the process, my dear, many have tried" she said curtly and got up and left.

Remembering her brief chat at a recent graduate presentation, Penny called up the Group HR Lead, an energetic and forward-thinking manager known for modernising how resources were deployed across the business. He'd introduced a Rapid Deployment Process, blending internal mobility with framework agreements with external suppliers, all channelled through an Internal Priority Portal.

To Penny's relief, he was both approachable and pragmatic. "Penny, I heard about your project," he said. "It's a flagship one, I can help you navigate the system". "We can help get you the right people fast, whether internally or through our framework partners."



Penny met with **Storm**, the Engineering Director. **Storm** as usual was in no mood for discussion; it was her role to ensure engineering delivered on its promises and met regulation and legislation. Initially very aggressive, Storm started to mellow and perhaps recognised a younger version of herself in Penny's determination and drive.

Eventually conceding "OK, ok," she conceded. "I'll return the engineers to close out the contract." Let's setup weekly follow up sessions so I can help you deliver the contract and then we can take each step from there.

For the first time, Penny felt a flicker of optimism. Perhaps not everyone in the organisation was a blocker after all?



The call with the **Gateway Chairperson**, was very brief and centred around progress and the sponsors support at this critical stage. The chairperson unimpressed by Brian's absence, calls him directly in Tahiti:

"Why are you on a jolly while the contract isn't even signed?", he asked and when Brian started his usual waffle was told promptly to get his arse back now and get things sorted.

Penny felt the tone had started to shift thanks to external influences and started to feel better.

Building Alliances

After the chaotic start, Penny knew she needed to reset, realign and rebuild confidence across the project. Drawing on her experience and her Mentors thoughts, she took a structured, approach.

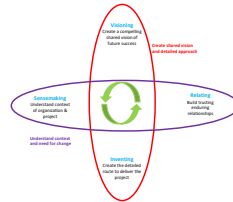
1. Stakeholders and Creating a Communications Plan

Penny led a session mapping the stakeholders, identifying who had the power and influenced and who could potentially derail progress.

She invited all the players Brilliant Brian, Storm, Gatekeeper, Slider, Finance, Comms, HR, Procurement, and key functional leads and Mr Know it all. Many couldn't make it, but the offer had been made and their involvement requested.

The team developed a **communications plan** tailored to each stakeholder with regular brief updates for Brian, detail logs for Storm, collaborative planning sessions with HR and Procurement, and bite-sized briefing notes for Finance and Comms with a general note across the business.

2. The 4-Step Engagement Plan



a. Understand the project and its strategic fit:

She reviewed the business case and the corporate strategy to understand the ‘WHY’ better and walked through the delivery lifecycle with the engineers. She familiarised herself with the outputs and the technical aspects of the delivery. She understood the background of the suppliers and their deliverables.

b. Hold 1-2-1s with key players:

Penny met each stakeholder individually, slowly building relationships, surfacing tensions, and clarifying roles and responsibilities, using ‘We’ and not I or You.

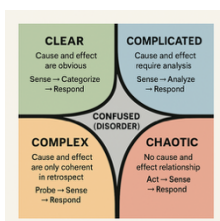
c. Build a shared vision:

Through these discussions, she explained the vision of the project, where it sat in the company’s strategy and how they could best document this as a simple “Project on a Page” summary of purpose, value, and milestones, something everyone could align with.

d. Integrate into pre-mobilisation plans:

She ensured that this shared understanding fed directly into the **pre-mobilisation gateway review**, setting the tone for collaboration and delivery discipline

3. Analysing Complexity – The Cynefin Lens



Recognising the project wasn’t straightforward, Penny used the **Cynefin Framework** to assess its complexity. It sat between “**complicated**” and “**complex**” — requiring expertise and adaptation and Penny included this as part of the project management plan and the reporting pack front page.

4. Refreshing the PESTLE Analysis

Penny led the re-running of the **PESTLE analysis** from the bid stage, this time focusing on **internal environmental factors** — culture, politics, resourcing dynamics, and organisational

readiness. This uncovered hidden constraints, like competing priorities, capacity gaps and aided assumptions and surfaced some new risks.

5. Drafting a Project Charter

PURPOSE What is the purpose of the project? (Why is it being done?) What are the expected benefits? (What will be achieved?)			
BUDGET What is the budget for the project? (How much money is available?) What are the expected costs? (What will it cost?)	TEAM Who is the project manager? (Who is in charge?) Who are the team members? (Who is on the team?)	CONDITIONS What are the conditions for the project? (What are the constraints?) What are the assumptions? (What are the assumptions?)	MILESTONES What are the milestones for the project? (What are the key dates?) What are the deliverables? (What are the deliverables?)
RESOURCES What are the resources for the project? (What are the resources?) What are the skills and experience of the team? (What are the skills and experience of the team?)		RISKS What are the risks for the project? (What are the risks?) What are the potential impacts? (What are the potential impacts?)	QUALITY What are the quality standards for the project? (What are the quality standards?) What are the expected outcomes? (What are the expected outcomes?)
		RESULT What are the results for the project? (What are the results?) What are the expected outcomes? (What are the expected outcomes?)	CUSTOMER Who is the customer for the project? (Who is the customer?) What are the customer requirements? (What are the customer requirements?)
TIME What is the timeline for the project? (What is the timeline?) What are the key dates? (What are the key dates?)			

The project charter reflected all the element's scope, objectives, governance, roles, and success criteria, outputs, and expected outcomes.

She circulated it for comment and put it in the PMP and hung it on the wall in the project room.

6. Resource Planning and Risk Awareness

Working with the Group HR Lead, Penny used the Rapid Deployment Process and framework agreements to plan resources. She assumed initial availability but documented the risks of dependency and delay, introducing the pre-mortem process so teams could proactively identify what might go wrong.

7. Rising Above Politics

When drawn into internal rivalries or blame cycles, Penny deliberately stayed neutral. Her mantra became: *"Focus on delivery, not drama, eyes on the prize"*. At times she had to listen to the monologue of Mr Know It All, about how he wouldn't do it this way or that way, and Brilliant Brian's previous great projects, she remained impassive and thought about shopping for dinner, Caesar salad sounded good.

8. Building Alliances and Trust

Penny led open, honest discussions with resource owners and functional leads, sharing data, plans, and rationale. Her consistent behaviour eventually built trust and credibility, she was seen as *doing the right thing*, not chasing credit or apportioning blame.

9. Re-engaging the Sponsor



Recognising Brilliant Brian's support was critical, she setup a regular one-to-one, accepting that she would need to listen to the world according to Brian every time. She however figured out that if these were held mid-morning and she brought chewy biscuits, he would chomp away on them, and she would get a chance to speak.

10. Delivering to Attract Support

As small wins began to emerge and the team started performing, the sceptics started to disappear, and people wanted to join the project.

Penny's quiet determination proved the old saying *"If you deliver this, they will come."*

What happened next

Well, I'd like to say that the project completed on time to budget, too scope and quality, a little bit like a fairy tale, "Where they all lived happy ever after".

Sadly, life's not like that...

The contract took over 2 months to agree, and the customer decided to hold the original delivery dates, making it very challenging. Change became a major factor causing multiple re-baselines, with a cessation of almost 6 months on the project. The resulting baseline was very different to the original, and many new risks now sat on the critical path. New shinier projects emerged in the business and some of the key staff moved off onto them, it felt like their time. Their replacements needed time to get up to speed, further hampering progress.

Brilliant Brian's time as sponsor and business leader came to a quiet end as he moved to a strategic advisor's role. No fireworks or grand announcement, just an all-staff short internal memo. He still popped up in meetings during the handover, camera off, voice as confident as ever, but it was clear that his show had simply moved on.

The gatekeeper waited and waited and soon after Brilliant Brian had moved on, convinced the new Sponsor to move the project into his domain.

Penny kept her cool, impressed her stakeholders and learned a great deal, the stuff that life & difficult projects teach you, not courses, books or podcasts. She created new processes that were included in the business management system and used on subsequent projects. With her mentor's support Penny achieved chartership and now proudly had CHPP after her name.

She started to recognise that if she remained on this project her opportunities would diminish. She kept in regular contact with her mentor and one day suggested to him that maybe it was time to move on...

With her mentor's aid and support Penny successfully landed a new role as a programme manager in another company and left the project (and the business) halfway through the final testing phase. She felt sad but knew the end of the project was in sight and it was the right time for her to move on.

On her last day she looked back one last time, at the players, still in their same roles, still playing their same little games in the small pond, they called home. **The Script** had a new assistant, who bizarrely looked like a mini version of her. **Storm** still stomped around but appeared to have mellowed. **Mr Know It All** was sliding his chair across the room to someone saying, "Just hit the resource levelling button and it will fix your schedule!!!". The **Gatekeeper** was sat in his office, same jacket, same coat hung over the chair so no one else could sit down. **Slider** waved goodbye smiling, mouthing '*Good luck*' as Penny left the building, walking out into the sunshine, into a new role, and a new start.

Penny would always remember this project as the one that taught her so much about people politics and processes and launched her career. She smiled, remembering how one email asking for help had changed everything for her and the project.

THE END