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Controversial Projects Can Succeed in Today's World...Even from the Brink of Defeat

*The key is not to try to make the
project acceptable but to require
that it be demanded*

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Is the necessary possible?

Philosophers would debate by defining these terms in probably intricate ways. You and I, people involved in nuclear projects may not know better, but we definitely know differently:

The necessary is what is on the political agenda and the possible is what people let happen.

The obvious danger is to have indifference marking the boundaries of human accomplishments, and to leave the determined actions of the few to speak for the majority.

Our contention at Altyor, as specialists in the promotion of large projects, is that "people out there" are never responsible for stopping projects - but that we are - the people in this room. The problem is not the gap between what is desirable and people's limited understanding and comprehension of the many issues. The problem is that we are all trying too hard to make our projects acceptable. We are begging for acceptance like the insecure trader who is afraid of losing the deal.

That assumption - that we need to bridge the communication gap, that we need to inform people, to spread the word, to raise awareness - leads us to activities that increase tension instead of diminishing it.

Our contention is that this assumption is misleading. The example we use concerns an institution that did a remarkable job in carrying out this assumption. In a profession, unlike in the arts, the more one learns, the better one becomes. The more professional that institution was, the worse the result it obtained. Maybe it was dealing with an art! If success in carrying out a large controversial project was an art, the implications would be devastating for society, which would find itself in the position of the novelist unable to produce a second bestseller.

Large controversial projects, fortunately, do not need to rely on the chancy inspiration of arts. But it requires step one of Anthony Robbins' "Awaken the giant within": Raise your standards.

Do not think that your aim is to make your project acceptable; your aim is that it be demanded. Hold onto that thought and you will soon come up with a number of actions that are very different from the ones usually undertaken, and which lead to a different result: success.

The first consequence of requiring that the project be demanded is that the approach cannot possibly be from the top down. To demand is not to agree to something. Presenting does not generate demand when it comes to controversial projects. On the contrary, the more a project is presented, the more it raises concerns. The more that is said, the more one wonders at the untold. The clever and safer choice is always to turn down an initial offer as if large projects were merely merchandise displayed in a souk.

A good sign that there is a demand for your project is when people start asking for specific characteristics, often overlooked by the engineers and the scientists.

Lobbying is not sufficient. Politicians will only support a project that has support, i.e. conundrum that lobbying cannot solve alone. Support on the ground emerges through a process of contacts with stakeholders and beneficiaries - a process we call "Reverse Lobbying™".

The second consequence of requiring that the project be demanded is that one is prevented from telling or even suggesting to people what they ought to ask. Another conundrum: expecting people to take a position, to formalise a demand without being able to "sell" the project to them. As it is often the case, the obstacle turns out to be a great opportunity. The best way to have people formalise a demand is to let them experience first hand by themselves what the project is and let them draw their own conclusions. This is what we call "Direct Benchmarking": letting people be in situation by presenting them comparable examples. There are always realisations elsewhere that show what our project means and in a way which words cannot match. This accelerates the awareness of the benefits. It is also a "confrontation". Words always raise the suspicion that reality will be as disappointing as the words are persuasive. Real life examples cannot be accused of such deception.

The legal framework of a large project can often be lived as a constraint rather than as an opportunity. Eating is an obligation that the French have turned into pleasure. Nothing prevents the promoters of a project from doing more than what is asked of them. The communication process can be one of mutual discovery when the stakeholders and beneficiaries are truly involved. Why not mobilise while the paperwork gets filled in?

A project whose process requires popular demand has concrete definite steps that vouch such requirement. Where many projects avoid votes and referenda, ours seek it. The more precise the steps - especially in large projects that are also very long - the more measurable the progress. The tools at the service of projects on the technical side dwarf those used on the human side (when they exist). Yet the visions of the engineers will never be realised if people do not mobilise to make those visions happen. The status of the mobilisation is a guide to action. We depict favourable positions in green, lack of positions or mitigating ones in orange

and hostile ones in red. Such reports need to be updated frequently. They give a visibility necessary to efficient actions. Too much red does not mean that the project is dead. It means that it is time to act. Green turned to red means that something is happening and it is time to know and react. Red turning to green means that the process is working.

Technology in the information age allows one to monitor the news and to analyse its relevance to the project. Information is collected in order to keep a calendar of events up to date and to exploit it. There is no excuse in our world not to know and there has never been an excuse not to act.

In conclusion, people make projects happen or not. A project that is not demanded by people, which does not respond to a problem they have, does not deserve to happen. Opposition to a project is no death threat. The opposite of opposition is indifference. The project needs active demands from allies. Only the lack of allies causes a project to die. Without allies there would be no project. This is the mobilisation wager. "I will only consider a project if local people ask for it": hear yourself demand this, raise the standard. To many this may seem more difficult than carrying on the usual convincing by traditional communication. It only looks more difficult because it is not the common way. The issue is not whether the process is easy or difficult. It is whether it is successful or not. We believe that the process we have described not only works, but that it makes ethical, political and economic sense.