Max Paradox

PROBLEM? RELAX. YOU'VE GOT THIS!

A tongue-in-cheek guide series ;)

I Have to Get Five Departments to Agree, and None of Them Reports to Me

How to Influence Without Formal Authority, Align Interests, and Get Departments Working Together When They Have Five Priorities and One Shared Deadline



We have a problem. But relax.
It can be solved—and we might even have a laugh along the way.

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INTRO

At 4:46 p.m. on Thursday, a major client sends an enthusiastic email thanking your company for preparing everything for Tuesday's launch. Your account director forwards it with a cheerful message: "Great work, team! Almost there!" Unfortunately, you have just discovered that the technology department has not received the final specifications, operations has not allocated the necessary staff, finance is waiting for billing details, and legal has identified a contractual issue that nobody remembers discussing. Five departments are involved. Each has a perfectly reasonable explanation for why its part is not finished. The client believes the project is ready. Senior management believes the project is ready. Your calendar suggests you should be somewhere else discussing another project that is also supposedly ready. And somehow, despite having no authority over any of these teams, you are the person expected to make Tuesday happen.

Welcome to one of the corporate world's most fascinating arrangements: responsibility without authority. It is a remarkable invention, combining the accountability of a senior executive with the decision-making powers of someone who has accidentally wandered into the wrong conference room. You are expected to coordinate departments whose managers have their own bosses, budgets, performance targets, and priorities. You can request information, arrange discussions, negotiate deadlines, and politely ask people to reconsider their schedules. What you cannot necessarily do is tell them what to work on, allocate their employees, approve additional spending, or overrule competing commitments. Yet when

the project misses its deadline, nobody asks whether you had the authority to make those decisions. They ask why you failed to coordinate everyone properly.

The problem is not necessarily that your colleagues are difficult, selfish, or determined to ruin your week. Most are trying to do their jobs responsibly. The technology manager is protecting system stability. Finance is watching costs and financial controls. Operations is trying to deliver existing commitments with limited capacity. Legal is assessing obligations that enthusiastic commercial promises do not magically erase. Your project is important, but importance looks different depending on which department's objectives, workload, and risks you are responsible for. From your perspective, everyone is working on one initiative. From theirs, your initiative is competing with dozens of others, each accompanied by somebody insisting that this particular request is the company's highest priority. Corporate life has developed an impressive ability to produce six number-one priorities without anyone finding the arithmetic suspicious.

Naturally, you begin with the tools available to you. You send emails, schedule meetings, create action trackers, and follow up on outstanding tasks. You write "friendly reminder" so frequently that the phrase starts to feel like a mild threat wearing business-casual clothing. You invite managers to alignment calls, where everyone agrees that alignment is essential. You circulate meeting notes, carefully documenting commitments that turn out to mean something different to every participant. When progress slows, you copy senior leaders into the conversation and hope that additional job titles will produce additional working hours. Occasionally these tactics help. Often they merely generate more communication around the same unresolved problem.

Everybody becomes exceptionally well informed about the fact that nothing has happened.

There is a reason this approach fails so often. Information, agreement, commitment, and execution are four different things. Someone can understand your request without accepting responsibility for it. They can support the objective without having the resources to contribute. They can agree to a deadline without knowing what they must postpone to meet it. And they can complete their assigned task while leaving the overall result impossible because another department expected something different. Managing these distinctions requires more than persistence. It requires understanding how work, decisions, and obligations move across organizational boundaries. If all you do is remind people that the deadline matters, you may spend an impressive amount of energy communicating a fact that everyone already knows.

Influence without formal authority is therefore not a mysterious personality trait possessed by unusually charismatic managers. You do not need to become the office's most persuasive storyteller, master psychological tricks, or develop the ability to make five department heads simultaneously experience a sudden desire to please you. Effective influence is built through credibility, an understanding of competing interests, carefully framed choices, and agreements that people can realistically honor. Sometimes it means helping another department see how your request connects to its own responsibilities. Sometimes it means reducing unnecessary work before asking for assistance. Sometimes it means identifying a decision that nobody in the room has the authority to make and putting it in front of someone who does.

Consider the difference between asking an operations manager, "Can your team get this done by Friday?" and asking, "What would your team need to delay to complete this by Friday, and who can authorize that trade-off?" The first question might produce an optimistic answer, especially in a meeting where nobody wants to appear uncooperative. The second begins to uncover the actual decision. Perhaps the work can be rearranged. Perhaps additional resources are available. Perhaps Friday is impossible without jeopardizing another important commitment. Whatever the answer, you are closer to a workable agreement because you have stopped treating willingness as a substitute for capacity. This is not a universal script to be repeated at every opportunity. It illustrates a habit worth developing: asking questions that expose the conditions under which cooperation can genuinely happen.

Throughout this book, we will look at the everyday machinery of cross-departmental work: competing incentives, unclear ownership, meetings that produce agreement but no decisions, projects built around imaginary resource availability, and tasks that vanish somewhere between "sent" and "received." We will explore how to handle disagreement without turning every discussion into a political contest, how to build realistic commitments, and how to recognize risks before they become expensive surprises. Just as importantly, we will examine what happens when the organization itself creates impossible expectations. Better communication cannot manufacture a missing budget. Personal determination cannot make one employee available to six projects at exactly the same time. Some problems need a change of scope, a different deadline, or a decision from someone with actual authority.

There is also a human cost to getting this wrong. When coordination becomes an endless exercise in chasing people, your working day fills with other people's unresolved decisions. You start checking messages during dinner, mentally rehearsing difficult conversations on weekends, and taking responsibility for outcomes you cannot fully control. Meanwhile, colleagues begin to associate your name with interruptions, urgent requests, and the unsettling appearance of another spreadsheet. Nobody particularly enjoys this arrangement, including the people who are technically benefiting from your heroic efforts. The aim is not to make you work harder at holding the organization together. It is to help you coordinate in a way that allows other people to carry their own responsibilities.

You will not find a promise that every department can be persuaded, every conflict resolved, or every deadline rescued. Organizations face genuine constraints, and people sometimes disagree for good reasons. Occasionally the responsible outcome is to say that the original plan is not achievable under the conditions provided. That is not necessarily a failure of leadership. It may be the clearest and most useful conclusion anyone has offered. The skill lies in knowing what you can influence, what requires negotiation, what needs a formal decision, and when continuing to push simply creates more activity without improving the outcome.

For now, think about one project that keeps returning to your attention despite all the meetings and reminders. Ask yourself what specifically remains unresolved. Is somebody missing information? Is a commitment competing with another obligation? Does a decision require authority nobody has exercised? Or are several departments defining success in incompatible ways? You do not have to solve the entire

problem immediately. Identifying the actual obstacle is already more useful than sending another message that begins, "Just following up on the below." Particularly when the message below is a forwarded conversation consisting of forty-seven replies, three contradictory attachments, and an increasingly desperate collection of exclamation marks.

You may never get to choose your five departments, their managers, or their priorities. You may not receive a grand new title, a larger team, or the satisfying ability to issue instructions that everyone must obey. But you can become much better at creating clarity, making trade-offs visible, securing meaningful commitments, and helping people reach decisions that lead to actual work. That is a valuable form of influence, even without a single direct report.

And if, one day, five departments manage to deliver something together without you personally rescuing the final forty-eight hours, do not be alarmed. The company has not lost its organizational personality. You may simply have helped it discover that cooperation is supposed to involve more than five people agreeing to put your name in the action tracker.

Chapter 1 - You're Accountable for the Result, but Nobody Reports to You

At 9:07 on Monday morning, your director announces that you will be leading the company's new employee travel platform project. The existing system is expensive, unpopular, and apparently designed by someone who believed booking a train ticket should require the same level of administrative commitment as applying for citizenship. The new platform promises faster reservations, better expense tracking, and fewer mysterious hotel invoices arriving three months after everyone has forgotten the trip. Senior management wants it operational across the company in twelve weeks. You are appointed project owner, congratulated on the opportunity, and invited to demonstrate your leadership skills. Nobody mentions that Procurement, Finance, IT, Human Resources, and Information Security will all be involved. More importantly, nobody mentions that none of them works for you.

The first meeting goes surprisingly well. The procurement manager agrees that the current supplier arrangement needs improvement. Finance wants better visibility of travel expenses. IT supports reducing manual administration. HR believes employees will welcome an easier process, and Information Security sees the opportunity to review access controls. Everyone supports the initiative. You leave feeling reasonably optimistic, which in corporate project management is often the brief period between receiving an assignment and discovering what the assignment actually involves. By Wednesday, Procurement has another contract renewal to finish, Finance is preparing quarterly reports, and

IT has allocated its available developers to a security upgrade. Your project is still officially a priority. Unfortunately, it appears to have joined a queue containing several hundred other priorities.

This situation reveals a distinction that organizations frequently overlook: being accountable for an outcome does not automatically give you authority over the resources required to produce it. You may be responsible for coordinating the launch, but the departmental managers decide how their employees spend their time. You can identify a technical requirement, but you cannot necessarily assign an engineer to implement it. You may recommend changing the launch date, but someone else has to authorize the decision. If you confuse these responsibilities, you will soon find yourself promising deliverables on behalf of people who have never agreed to produce them.

The temptation is to behave like everyone's temporary manager. You create an action tracker, assign names to tasks, set deadlines, and expect updates. This feels organized, particularly when the spreadsheet has enough conditional formatting to resemble the control panel of a spacecraft. But placing someone's name beside a task does not give you the right to allocate their working hours. A departmental employee may accept your request because the project sounds important, then discover that their manager has assigned them something else. You interpret the delay as a broken commitment. The employee believes they were simply participating in a discussion. Their manager wonders why someone outside the department is rearranging the team's workload. All three interpretations can coexist, and none helps launch the platform.

The Authority You Actually Have

Before trying to influence five departments, establish precisely what authority comes with your assignment. The question may feel uncomfortable because you have already accepted responsibility and would rather appear capable than ask whether you are allowed to make basic decisions. Nevertheless, an unclear mandate is a serious operational risk. Find out who sponsors the project, which decisions you can make independently, what budget or resources have been approved, and how conflicts between departmental priorities are supposed to be resolved. These are not questions about your personal importance. They determine whether the assignment has a workable structure.

Imagine asking your director whether you can choose the platform supplier. The answer might be that Procurement owns the selection process, Finance must approve the commercial commitment, and Information Security must assess the solution before the contract can proceed. You may coordinate the evaluation and recommend an option, but you cannot independently approve the purchase. That arrangement can work perfectly well if everyone understands it. Problems arise when you are told to "own the supplier decision" without being informed that four different functions possess essential approval rights. You then spend weeks gathering informal agreement, only to discover that the organization cannot proceed because an authorized decision has never been made.

One useful distinction is between responsibility for producing information, responsibility for performing work, and authority to commit organizational resources. These roles may belong to different people. An IT analyst might assess integration requirements. Their manager decides whether the team can perform the implementation during the

planned period. A technology executive may need to approve an exception involving significant cost or risk. Asking the analyst to guarantee an implementation date without checking resource approval puts them in an unfair position. It also gives your schedule a dangerously optimistic foundation. The analyst can be entirely sincere and still lack the authority to deliver what you believe was promised.

Make these boundaries visible early, particularly for decisions that could materially affect the project. You do not necessarily need an elaborate governance document. For a manageable initiative, a concise agreement with the sponsor may establish who owns the objective, who approves spending, who can change the scope, and who resolves competing resource demands. Share the relevant distinctions with departmental leaders so they know when you are requesting expertise, seeking a commitment, or presenting a proposal requiring their approval. The objective is not to create an impressive hierarchy of signatures. It is to prevent crucial decisions from getting lost between people who each assume someone else has authority.

An additional benefit of clarifying your mandate is knowing where you can act without unnecessary permission. Some coordinators respond to limited authority by asking the sponsor to approve every detail. That makes the sponsor an expensive human confirmation button and turns routine coordination into a prolonged ceremony. You may be perfectly entitled to organize workshops, maintain the project schedule, consolidate requirements, or establish reasonable communication arrangements within the agreed framework. Use that freedom. Influence without authority does not mean helplessly requesting permission to perform every administrative action. It means knowing where your

discretion ends and someone else's decision-making rights begin.

A Commitment Is Not the Same as an Assignment

Return to the travel platform. You need IT to establish a secure connection between the booking system and the company's employee directory. Sending a task to the most knowledgeable engineer might appear efficient, but it does not establish whether the department can deliver it. A stronger approach is to work with the relevant manager to define the required outcome, expected effort, dependencies, and feasible delivery window. The manager can then determine who should do the work and whether it fits existing commitments. You may have less control over the individual assignment, but you gain something considerably more useful: a realistic basis for planning.

This requires resisting the urge to extract an immediate promise from every conversation. When someone says, "I think we can do that next week," pay attention to the uncertainty. Perhaps the work is straightforward, but the person needs to verify another deadline. Instead of treating the statement as a confirmed commitment, establish when confirmation will be available and who can provide it. A reliable answer tomorrow is generally more useful than an enthusiastic answer today that becomes a disappointed apology next Thursday. You are not trying to make everybody cautious about every minor task. You are trying to distinguish genuine agreements from polite expressions of goodwill.

There is also a difference between accepting responsibility for a deliverable and accepting responsibility for everything that precedes it. Finance may agree to validate the new expense categories, but that work might

require a complete list of booking types from Procurement. If the list is unavailable, Finance cannot reasonably complete its review. Your role is to make the dependency understandable and ensure the parties know when their contributions are needed. You do not become the financial specialist, procurement officer, and technical architect simply because you understand how their work connects. A conductor needs to know when the orchestra should enter. That does not require personally playing the violin, trumpet, and percussion whenever someone looks distracted.

Nevertheless, refusing to perform anyone else's work is not a virtue in itself. A practical coordinator occasionally helps prepare material, clarify a requirement, or remove a small obstacle when doing so saves time and falls within their competence. The danger begins when helpful exceptions become the operating model. If you repeatedly compensate for missing departmental commitments with your own overtime, the project may appear successful while its underlying resource problem remains unresolved. Next time, management may expect exactly the same result with exactly the same resources, including your apparently unlimited evenings. This is how a temporary favor can quietly develop into a permanent job description without the inconvenience of a salary discussion.

Escalation Is a Decision Route, Not a Punishment

Eventually, even a well-structured project will encounter disagreements that the participating managers cannot settle. Suppose Procurement wants to sign a supplier contract immediately to secure favorable commercial terms, while Information Security requires additional assessment before approval. The disagreement does not necessarily mean either department is being obstructive. Each protects a

legitimate interest, and neither may have authority to override the other's requirements. Your task is to identify the unresolved decision, understand the consequences, and bring it to an appropriate level without pretending that another round of reminders will make the conflict disappear.

A poor escalation reads like a complaint: "Information Security is delaying the project again, and we urgently need leadership support." A more useful escalation explains what decision is required. The supplier's pricing remains available until a specified date, the assessment has identified outstanding questions, and the team needs to determine whether the contract can be adjusted, whether the decision must wait, or whether a different option should be considered. Any mandatory review must still be completed by the appropriate authority. The sponsor receives an intelligible business problem rather than an invitation to decide which department has been sufficiently annoying to deserve a stern email.

Escalating every disagreement would be equally ineffective. If two specialists simply need to clarify an interface requirement, it makes little sense to involve an executive before allowing them to resolve it. Judgment matters. Ask whether the people currently involved have the information, authority, and capacity to reach an agreement. If they do, facilitate that discussion. If the obstacle concerns an unapproved budget, a competing strategic priority, or an exception requiring formal authorization, identify the decision owner. A useful coordinator neither hides difficult issues nor treats senior management as an all-purpose dispute-resolution vending machine. The aim is to get decisions made at the lowest appropriate level, not necessarily the highest available one.

Your sponsor also has responsibilities. They should understand the constraints under which you are expected to deliver and help resolve conflicts that exceed your mandate. If they demand a fixed deadline while declining to clarify resource priorities, explain the consequences rather than accepting an impossible guarantee. You can state which deliverables are supported by confirmed commitments, which remain conditional, and what must change to make the original target feasible. This conversation may be awkward, particularly when the sponsor believes confidence is the primary ingredient of leadership. But protecting them from inconvenient facts today merely increases the likelihood of a much less pleasant conversation later.

What Success Looks Like Without Direct Reports

Over time, the travel platform project begins to function more predictably. Departmental managers confirm realistic contributions, decisions have identifiable owners, and work is planned around genuine dependencies. A delayed security assessment no longer produces five separate conversations about who is being unreasonable. It produces a clear understanding of which tasks can continue and which decisions must wait. Nobody has surrendered managerial authority to you. They have simply gained a more dependable mechanism for coordinating their separate responsibilities.

You can measure your own contribution by examining what has become clearer because of your involvement. Are the required outcomes understood? Do commitments come from people able to authorize them? Are significant dependencies visible before they create avoidable surprises? Do unresolved issues reach the appropriate decision-makers with enough information to act? These

questions provide a fairer assessment of your coordination work than counting emails, meetings, or heroic last-minute rescues. They also help separate problems you could reasonably prevent from circumstances beyond your control.

This distinction matters for your professional confidence. Responsibility without authority can create the feeling that you must somehow compensate for every limitation through personal persistence. You cannot. You can influence the quality of agreements, the visibility of risks, and the clarity of decisions. You cannot independently supply every missing resource or guarantee another manager's priorities. Accepting those limits does not reduce your accountability for doing your own job well. It makes that accountability meaningful, because you can finally distinguish your decisions from everyone else's.

The project may still encounter delays, compromises, and difficult conversations. Its final outcome will depend on factors beyond your individual control. But you no longer have to pretend to be the unofficial manager of five departments. Your value lies in helping the organization coordinate choices that would otherwise remain disconnected. That is a genuine leadership contribution, even when the organizational chart has no convenient box for it.

And when someone congratulates you on getting so much done without having anybody report to you, accept the compliment. There is no need to explain that the greatest achievement was persuading everyone to stop treating an action tracker as a legally binding employment contract.

Chapter 2 - Five Departments, Five Definitions of Winning

The packaging team has developed a refill pouch that could reduce the amount of plastic used in the company's household cleaning products. Marketing loves the concept. Sales believes retailers will welcome a less expensive refill option. The sustainability team sees an opportunity to improve packaging performance, while manufacturing has calculated that the new pouch will slow down one production line. Distribution is concerned about damaged units during transportation, and Finance has questions about the additional equipment required. At the product launch meeting, everyone agrees that reducing unnecessary packaging is an excellent idea. Forty minutes later, the discussion has become a polite disagreement about whether the excellent idea should ever be allowed near an actual factory.

What makes this situation difficult is that nobody needs to be wrong. Marketing wants a compelling product proposition. Manufacturing wants consistent output and dependable production schedules. Distribution wants products that can survive transportation without becoming an expensive collection of leaking containers. Finance wants an economically sustainable investment. The sustainability team wants the environmental claims to reflect what the packaging genuinely achieves. Each department is evaluating the same proposal through a different definition of success. And each may be performing its own job responsibly while making the shared decision harder.

Organizations often describe their objectives as though everyone is climbing the same mountain. The company wants growth, efficiency, customer satisfaction, and responsible operations. These broad ambitions sound compatible until people must decide what to sacrifice to achieve them. Sales may be rewarded for revenue growth, while manufacturing is measured against production cost and output. Finance may be expected to protect margins, and Distribution may be evaluated on delivery performance and damage rates. When the new refill pouch appears, it creates costs and benefits that do not fall equally across those departments. The organization may benefit overall, but the people asked to deliver that benefit can experience very different consequences.

This is why appeals to teamwork sometimes produce so little progress. Telling Manufacturing that everyone needs to support innovation does not explain how it should handle a slower production line. Telling Finance that sustainability matters does not establish whether the investment is affordable. And telling Distribution to be more flexible will not make a fragile package survive being stacked beneath several hundred kilograms of other products. The departments are not necessarily rejecting the company's goals. They are identifying the practical consequences that become visible from their own positions.

The Invisible Scoreboards

To understand a department's decisions, look at how its performance is assessed. Formal performance measures are not the only influence, but they often shape what managers pay attention to and which risks they feel responsible for controlling. A manufacturing manager might be genuinely enthusiastic about innovation while also knowing that

production interruptions will appear in the monthly operations review. The commercial manager may welcome the new product because it could attract customers who otherwise choose competing brands. Both can believe they are acting in the company's best interests. They simply face different consequences when the project succeeds or fails.

Imagine that the refill pouch generates promising sales but reduces the factory's hourly output. Marketing celebrates a successful launch, while Manufacturing reports declining productivity. Finance sees the cost of new equipment, Distribution records additional handling expenses, and the sustainability team tracks the change in packaging material. Without a shared assessment of the overall result, the same initiative can be described as an outstanding success or a serious disappointment depending on whose presentation you attend. The danger is not that one department has invented its figures. The danger is that everyone is judging a common outcome using a different portion of its consequences.

This creates a particular problem for someone coordinating across departments. You may believe that explaining the project's strategic importance should settle the disagreement. Yet managers are accountable for obligations that remain real after your presentation ends. If the factory misses existing delivery commitments because resources were redirected, the manufacturing manager may have to explain those failures. If extra transportation costs eliminate the expected margin, Finance cannot responsibly ignore them. Asking these managers to support the project without addressing such consequences effectively asks them to accept personal accountability for decisions they may not control.

A useful conversation therefore begins by identifying what each function must protect and what it could reasonably change. Manufacturing might be able to accommodate the pouch during a planned production adjustment, provided capacity is reserved in advance. Distribution may be willing to test different packing arrangements rather than reject the design entirely. Finance may need a credible investment scenario instead of a general promise of future growth. The sustainability team may require testing before certain environmental claims can be made. These are not necessarily objections to the same thing. They are different conditions for responsible participation.

Be careful, however, not to interpret every concern as disguised self-interest. Some boundaries are established by product safety requirements, legal obligations, technical realities, or other necessary controls. They cannot be negotiated away merely because a commercially attractive opportunity exists. A manager who insists on required testing is not automatically being territorial. Similarly, declining to approve spending without appropriate authorization is not proof that Finance dislikes innovation. Understanding incentives helps explain behavior, but it must not become an excuse to dismiss legitimate professional judgment.

When One Department's Improvement Becomes Another's Problem

A common source of frustration is the uneven distribution of effort. One team proposes an improvement because it sees a significant benefit, while several other teams must perform the work required to make it happen. The requesting department may experience the initiative as a