

How big things get done: the surprising factors behind every successful project, from home renovations to space exploration: by Bent Flyvbjerg and Dan Gardner, London, Pan Macmillan, 2023, 284 pages, UK £16.99 (softcover), ISBN 978-1-0350-1893-2

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BOOK REVIEW How big things get done: the surprising factors behind every successful project, from home renovations to space exploration, by Bent Flyvbjerg and Dan Gardner, London, Pan Macmillan, 2023, 284 pages, UK £16.99 (softcover), ISBN 978-1-0350-1893-2

Megaprojects have a mega problem: too often, they bust budgets, break deadlines, and fail to deliver as promised. This is the so-called Iron Law of Megaprojects, elaborated by Bent Flyvbjerg (2017) to explain how big projects all around the world – from transportation to IT to sporting spectacles – fail so consistently, regardless of planning culture or political-economic context. In *How Big Things Get Done*, Flyvbjerg (along with co-author Dan Gardner) takes his decades of megaproject experience away from university halls, consultancy boardrooms, and municipal offices, in order to speak to a popular audience. The result is compelling, written in a brisk and convivial tone that would not feel out of place in the business section of an airport bookshop. Flyvbjerg – no doubt aided by Gardner, a bestselling author – has enough charisma to handle this departure from traditional academic prose, while his depth of experience makes the book valuable for a wide audience, regardless of professional status. Casual readers and experts alike will benefit.

At heart, *How Big Things Get Done* is a high-level summary of Flyvbjerg's life's work. On the foundation of his projects database (totalling over 16,000 entries from 136 countries), Flyvbjerg has become renowned as an expert on megaprojects and how they go wrong. In effect, *How Big Things Get Done* is a distillation of the learnings gleaned from this database. The book is organized around his principal findings, with each chapter featuring a typical failing with megaprojects – or projects of any size, really (one of Flyvbjerg's points is that similar principles apply regardless of scale). He follows with recommendations for how to reorganize thinking and practice in order to avoid these pitfalls.

Each chapter begins with an epigraph that digests the key points from the subsequent pages. In true business book fashion, these distillations are further reduced into pithy, one sentence summaries placed helpfully in the table of contents. These are repeated again in the book's Coda, one paragraph per chapter, as a handy reminder or for those truly short on time. This is a helpful hammering home of the book's key

principles, but the reader who focuses only on these summaries will miss Flyvbjerg's insights on some of the world's most infamous megaproject failures and successes. These analyses are the engine that drive the book, and they are worth reading. For instance, to illustrate the principle 'Think Slow, Act Fast' (Chapter 1), Flyvbjerg details the disastrous initial planning of the Pentagon headquarters. Picture 'the world's biggest and ugliest office building' (24), a misshapen, non-equilateral pentagon sited at Arlington National Cemetery, blocking the view of the monuments of Washington, DC. This nearly came to pass. Through inside views of famous projects, Flyvbjerg brings his principles to life.

How Big Things Get Done is replete with fascinating examples of planning disasters and successes. 'Think from Right to Left' (Chapter 3) is an exhortation to develop and maintain '... a clear, informed understanding of what the [project] goal is and why' (51). This is illustrated by the failure of Apple's Power Mac G4 computer, which was so futuristic that it lacked a power switch. Conversely, Amazon's plain-language process for developing new products is Flyvbjerg's example of how to do things right. 'Pixar Planning' (Chapter 4) conveys the value of experimentation and iterative learning, but it is Flyvbjerg's analysis of the case studies that resonate. This 'Pixar principle' is illustrated not just by the movie studio's remarkable production process, but by Frank Gehry's on time and under budget success with the Guggenheim Bilbao, and in negative terms by Jørn Utzon's catastrophic handling of the Sydney Opera House. One of Flyvbjerg's most compelling arguments for the value of good planning is that the Sydney debacle ruined Utzon's career. Subsequently, the world was deprived of his works of genius that might have been.

Overall, Flyvbjerg makes a case for slow thinking, clear goals, experimentation, practical experience, humility, authentic collaboration, and modularity. Planning in this sense is not a passive, bureaucratic exercise. Instead, for Flyvbjerg, proper planning is a dynamic process that can break the Iron Law: 'over budget, over time, under benefits, over and over again', (7). How Big Things Get Done is his attempt to bring to popular audiences this radical rethink of planning practices. Some readers may be put off by the famous names casually dropped throughout the book, while others may disagree with his perhaps overly simple solutions to some of the world's most intractable problems. But it is undeniable that Flyvbjerg has amassed a wealth of megaproject experience, and it is good that he shares what he has learned. In his

telling, the principles that built the Empire State Building on time and under budget can be applied equally well to projects at both global and individual scales. Another of Flyvbjerg's principles is to valorize what he calls phronesis – practical wisdom or experience. In *How Big Things Get Done*, the reader is invited to learn from the phronesis of one of the world's megaproject experts.

References

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