



The importance of starting well

Seminar 137 held at the Institution of Civil Engineers, London
14th November 2007

Summary

Key conclusions

- Project management is not about using project management methods: it is when you fulfil the project management role.
- 'Good begun is half completed.'
- Treat start-up as a mini project in itself and collectively project manage the leadership.
- Dress rehearsals and mock-ups allow you to identify a problem and to work out how to solve it in advance.
- Avoid drifting into execution.
- For most people it is unnatural to want to put effort into planning – starting well means challenging this natural desire to want to *do* things.
- Can the project manager lead the project as well as do it?
- Consider providing a coach for the project manager.
- If you have a vision and no resources it is just a dream – a project can only start when the business case has been approved and appropriate funding is in place.
- At the beginning of a project you should focus on outcomes, not on outputs.
- Be boringly predictable on delivery: in order to do this you have to start well.
- Any major project is an amalgam of careers. Many people who start a major project do not stay around to see it completed – this is a challenge to manage.
- Time is your most valuable resource – use it skilfully.
- Control is about influencing what is about to happen. You have the most control at the beginning of a project – use it.

Introduction

The seeds of success for a major project are sown right at the start, as are the seeds of failure. Once the execution phase of a project is under way there are severe limitations on what can be done to alter the course of events. This applies to all sectors of major project work, in all parts of the world.

This half day seminar looked at the importance of handling the start-up phase of a project thoroughly and perceptively, and examined how the early key decisions such as procurement, contracting strategy and attitude to risk should be made.

Proactive management of projects

The first speaker, a specialist in the development of effective start-up approaches for projects, based his talk on the publication *'Competencies in Project Management'* published in 2005 by the Danish Project Management Association. This publication forms the National Competence Baseline for Scandinavia and represents a body of project management knowledge.

The presentation looked at how to promote proactive management of projects, concentrating on four main themes:

- distinguishing between management and execution modes
- planning and evaluating project management
- combining behaviour, methods and experiences
- organising preparation and start-up processes

All too often there is difficulty in making the distinction between project management and project execution, which tends to result in reactive project management. It is not possible to prove the value of an active start-up in monetary terms, but distinguishing between management performance and management execution helps the planning and evaluation of the project management during start-up and throughout the life cycle, and should be an essential part of the overall structure of the programme.

Often this is common sense, and prompts the challenge of how to make what is common sense, common practice. One essential prerequisite is to spend sufficient time at the outset on the management structure and facilities for communication.

Good project management is built on the interaction of method application, experience application and leadership behaviour, and the presentation looked at the importance and function of each of these elements.

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Programme for preparatory workshop

Workshop introduction:

Purpose, programme and working method
Round with proposals and expectations

Anchoring effort:

Introduction by client / applicant / management
Summary of the master project plan

Analyse project and environment:

Situational analysis – with dialogue about the plan
Use of selected analysis method

Master project planning:

Specifying the objectives, process and organisation

Project execution:

Clarification of needs / opportunities consequences

Workshop closing:

Round on conclusions & further recommendations
Plan for documentation and follow-up

Development of a master project plan is crucial to start-up, and forms the basis for managing the project:

Strategy, outcomes and stakeholders

With many years' experience of leading and managing engineering projects and programmes in the British Army and the private sector, the second speaker looked at one of the greatest global challenges of the 21st century: infrastructure. Characterised by under-investment and increasing public expectations, the scale and reasons why infrastructure poses such a challenge were considered.

In the UK, infrastructure should be thought of in an overall strategic context as an essential catalyst to national economic development. The presentation looked at the key areas of strategy, outcomes and stakeholders and how these might be managed to meet the challenges and influence the success of major infrastructure programmes.

It is vital to start the dialogue – the development of the strategy and its outcomes – much earlier than has traditionally been the case, and with a broader range of influential stakeholders. The strategy must be clearly articulated and aligned with the desired outcomes, and suggestions were given as to how this might be achieved. Linked with the need to derive appropriate outcomes from the strategy is the requirement to select a suitable contractual approach to deliver the required level and quality of service.

As far as stakeholder management is concerned, understanding the best way of communicating with key stakeholders is a critical aspect in any project or programme. Good communication is essential from the outset, as is the ability to work in innovative partnerships.

The road to 'relentless predictability'

The third presentation provided an insight into project function at British Energy. The vision of the projects team is to focus on the road to 'relentless predictability' in project execution, and key to achieving this vision is 'starting well'.

Case studies of projects which had started well, and one that had not started so well were outlined.

Some tips for starting well included:

- Give sufficient time and attention to preparing what you are going to do and then do what you have said you can do
- Do not be pressurised into going into action too quickly
- Make sure that the scope of work is right, and the right problems are being solved
- Manage the message so that the team can get on with the job and do not waste time telling people what they are doing
- Make sure that risk is allocated realistically

Analysis

In the analysis of the proceedings it was noted that time and resources were recurrent themes. The majority of time wasted on projects is generally not because solutions to problems are unavailable, but because insufficient time and resources are allowed to anticipate problems early.

The seminar prompted the following questions:

- Why do organisations and project teams drift collectively into the execution of a project, when in reality there are often individuals in those organisations or teams who feel progress towards the project start should be proceeding somewhat differently?
- Why does the collective behaviour of an organisation or project team, whether in planning a project strategy or in sanctioning a project, not seem to operate at the same level of intelligence and objectivity as the sum of the people taking part in the project ?

Conclusions

- Whatever your age, time is your most valuable resource. How well we use our own time seems to be a measure of our capability of managing other people's time.
- [A Cooper Stage-Gate process](#) is a disciplined control of how a project moves forward and enables us to decide at key points whether it should proceed further.
- The scope of the project has to be engendered in the minds of all parties concerned, not just in the minds of those who are employed to do the work.
- Attention to the first 10% of any work is crucial, to see if everyone knows what they have to do and why, and if they are able to make a good start.
- 'Control' graphs measuring progress at each stage of the project only say what has happened in the past. Control is about influencing what is about to happen.

Participating organisations

Amey
Arup
Association for Project Management
BAA plc
BAE SYSTEMS, Submarines
Balfour Beatty plc
Bircham Dyson Bell
Bovis Lend Lease
British Energy
British Telecommunications plc
Comply Serve Ltd
EDF Energy
Ernst & Young LLP
Fangel Consultants
Freshfields Bruckhaus Deringer
Henley Management College
IBM Business Consulting Services
John Laing plc
KPMG LLP
Linklaters
Major Projects Association
Mott MacDonald Group Ltd
National Audit Office
Network Rail Infrastructure Ltd
PA Consulting Group
QinetiQ
Scott Wilson Kirkpatrick & Co, Ltd
Shadbolt & Co LLP
Transport for London
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