

# best practice *focus*

These pages, sponsored by the APM Group, look at news and best practice around PRINCE2, M\_o\_R – Management of Risk, and MSP – Managing Successful Programmes.

## More strategic project control for less effort Strategic direction using five 'best practice' principles

By Michiel van der Molen

The project executive represents the customer organisation's senior management and is responsible for the strategic direction of the project and the delivery of its proposed benefits. He, or she, directs the work of the project manager, therefore, any organisation striving to improve project management faces the challenge of developing the project executive role. In this article Michiel van der Molen, author of PRINCE2 for the Project Executive, shares his experiences of working with groups of business managers who fulfil this role.

### The role of the project executive

Despite an abundance of training courses, books and magazines for project managers, little attention has been given to the development of the role of the project executive. Even business managers who have studied at highly respected business schools have rarely been taught what being a good project executive entails. In fact, it involves responsibility for the strategic direction of the project and for ensuring that the project meets the business needs.

In the management development programmes of many organisations this area seems to be a blind spot. But given the strategic nature of the project executive role – and its critical effect on project success – this is amazing. A one-day workshop for managers undertaking this role, during which they can work together to build on their existing knowledge and to develop a greater understanding of how to direct projects strategically, may provide more benefits for an organisation than a three-day training course for project managers.

### Business managers under pressure

When someone feels that they 'already have too much to do and not enough time in which to do it', any request to attend a training session or to give increased priority to project tasks is likely to fall on deaf ears. What is it, then, that would make an already busy manager want to further develop skills for strategically directing projects, especially as many of them perceive that the success or failure of a project is solely the responsibility of the project manager?

They are busy people with problems of their own, so the additional role of project executive often takes a lower priority than their existing responsibilities.

The secret in motivating them is for them to realise that it is possible to gain more control with less effort.

### Five best practices

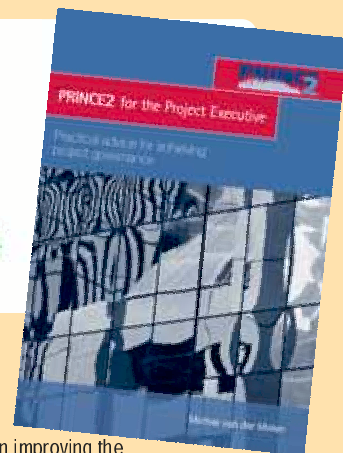
More control for less effort can be achieved by following 'five best practices for strategic project direction':

- **The business case drives the project** in that it is an invaluable leadership tool for use in creating focus within, and support for, the project
- **Involving stakeholders in project direction** provides for an organised, and therefore effective, use of their individual contributions through the use of clearly defined roles and responsibilities; whether as a member of the project board, a user committee or a supplier forum, or in a quality review or project assurance role
- **Focusing on products** enables greater control over project outcomes and facilitates the provision of more reliable progress information
- **Breaking the project into management stages** facilitates continuing and effective control by the confirmation and, if necessary, the updating of business ownership at strategic points throughout the project

- **Management by exception** reduces the time required for formal meetings while at the same time improving the effectiveness of project control



*The five best practices for strategic project direction and their relevance for the project executive*



### Management workshop

A proven tool to get business managers involved in improving the strategic control of their projects is to run workshops, focused on integrating the specific challenges of project direction in their organisation with the five best practices mentioned above. The starting point of these workshops is a list of key barriers, as experienced by the attendees, to successful projects. This list can either be prepared in advance (based on interviews) or as the result of a 'brainstorming' session at the beginning of the workshop.

Such an approach enables the five best practices to be introduced and directly linked to the issues and bottlenecks actually experienced by the business managers. This has proved to be very motivating and effective in convincing them that they really will benefit directly from their use.

As the workshop progresses, the business managers can work together to discuss the basic causes that, from their perspective, make it hard for them to 'simply' turn each project into a success and to explore which of the five best practices can be used to resolve each one.

In addition to this, participants can be asked to provide, in advance, one or two real-life scenarios which they can then discuss and 'work through' using their knowledge of the way their organisation functions and how they could apply the five best practices within it.

By working through, and finding solutions to their actual project issues themselves, the relevance to them of the five best practices becomes ingrained in a far better way than any amount of 'telling them'.

Towards the end of the workshop the attendees are invited to produce a summary of their conclusions from the day; in particular the added value that the use of the five best practices can bring to them and their organisation. The author's experience, drawn from in excess of 60 workshops in a variety of organisations, is that the participants have always found these best practices to be beneficial and to have a high impact on their specific project issues, affording them greater control but with less effort.

This workshop approach can be used as part of a PRINCE2 roll-out programme, but is also suitable to be included in an organisation's standard management development programme.

## Project board start-up

As an alternative approach, the workshop principles can be applied during a project board start-up session, during which the project board members and the project manager apply the best practices to the current project, thus obtaining a common insight into the business case and project deliverables, as well as into each person's specific roles and responsibilities. It can be held right before the start of the project or during the initiation stage. In this way, immediate results can be achieved for the current project.

In addition to other training and coaching activities, this kind of workshop can be used to give a boost to the effective improvement of project control during a PRINCE2 roll-out programme.

## Do's and don'ts

In the author's experience, there are a few important do's and don'ts:

- Don't assume that business managers will be interested in a project management method; so don't invite them for a 'PRINCE2 overview'. Do identify their particular problems and issues. Invite them for a workshop with a title like 'More control for less effort' (add 'based on PRINCE2' if appropriate) and help them to relate the five best practices for strategic project direction to these problems and issues.
- Don't pretend to know how business managers should improve the direction of their specific projects. Do recognise that managers may find it hard to accept that they need to learn basic skills for strategically directing a project, and work interactively with the participants to discover how the best practices (adapted if necessary) can be applied best in their particular environment.
- Don't allow the blame for project failures to be placed on project managers. Do explain that improving project control is achieved when every participant improves

the areas under their specific control, and not by blaming someone else for failures. Of course, you take the same position when you work with project managers who try to blame their project executives.

## Conclusions

For businesses to respond to increasing high levels of competition and the need for tight financial management, projects have to be able to deliver new products and services in an efficient and cost-effective manner. The partnership between the project executive and the project manager is fundamental in achieving this. It is vital that project executives fully understand their role and responsibilities and that they have the knowledge and skills to control the strategic direction of the project. Workshops based on the five best practices for strategic project direction, as defined in the author's book, will provide them with these skills, allowing them to be better able to control projects with less effort.

This article was edited by Madeleine J. Larke and reviewed by Shirley Solomon, Manager Supply Chain, Corus Strip Products, and Timothy J. O'Brien de Clare, IT Audit Manager, Corus Group plc.

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## 'Project Climate Change'



The annual Best Practice Showcase held in Central London in June attracted over 700 people. During a packed day of seminar sessions and briefings, one of the most novel sessions was delivered by Bob Black, a people skills change facilitator and Learning Tree author, and Simon Ekblom, bid and project director, Hay Group. It all began in the bar . . . Bob and Simon became two project

managers propping a bar – they even had a real bar, complete with beer and pumps – meeting to discuss how they could turn around a project that was in difficulty. The theme of the session was that project processes are not enough in themselves to guarantee successful projects.

As Bob said to Simon: 'If we all stare at the PRINCE2 manual do you think the pages will turn by themselves?'

Not likely!

They needed the people involved on the project to understand the 'why' of the project and then to support it with appropriate leadership style and project climate'. Using real examples drawn from their work with Hay Group, Learning Tree and private practice, their bar room conversation demonstrated that by combining robust methodology, effective communication, practical models, and appropriate training, projects can be delivered far more successfully.

They identified the value of establishing the optimum project climate through the application of appropriate leadership styles. The project climate is measured using six dimensions such as clarity and responsibility, while there are six leadership styles in the project manager's toolkit including directive, coaching and participative.

The seminar was so well received that the 'Bar' will be open again for free later this year. For further details about the seminar call 0800 282 353 or e-mail [uksales@learningtree.co.uk](mailto:uksales@learningtree.co.uk)

## PRINCE2 still not understood

**'PRINCE2 is still not understood', says John Edmonds, senior consultant from training and consultancy organisation Pearce Mayfield.**

In a recent news article on the Contractor UK Network there was a call for Gordon Brown to 'turn his back on traditional methods of IT project management such as PRINCE2'. The logic given in the article for this call was that public sector projects are failing to deliver, and that PRINCE2 was to blame.

I think that exactly the opposite is the truth – that projects are failing to deliver precisely because PRINCE2 is either not being used at all, or is being used incorrectly.

Recently, I attended a meeting in Westminster to help set the scope for the PRINCE2 Refresh Project, a project that will ensure that PRINCE2 remains the de-facto standard for project management by keeping it up to date and relevant.

Our experience, as a company that has been involved with PRINCE2 since its genesis before its launch in 1996, is that organisations that understand the key principles of this project management method, and then determine to tailor the method in an intelligent and thoughtful way, do see successful project delivery.

In the last couple of years we have seen tremendous growth in the acceptance of and use of PRINCE2 throughout the world. Public and Private sector organisations in Europe, China, India, the United States and the Middle East will not have welcomed PRINCE2 so eagerly if it was an inflexible, expensive and ultimately failing method of delivering projects.

PRINCE2 gives us an excellent flexible governance and management structure; a superb product-based approach to planning enabling us to focus on measurable outcomes and a controlled environment that ensures that progress is tracked and managed on a stage by stage basis.

So my call to Gordon Brown is not to abandon this proven project management method, but to encourage and champion its intelligent use in all public sector projects, big and small. That is the real use of PRINCE2, not just the use of its name!

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