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Commentary   Alan Stretton

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By Alan Stretton

INTRODUCTION

In 2011 I wrote a paper in PM World Today which discussed the question about "Involving program/project managers in organisational strategic planning?" (Stretton 2011j). That paper is reproduced in this edition of PM World Journal as a Second Edition, and this note expands on some of the materials in that paper.

The original paper identifies two main components of organizational strategic planning:

- First establishing the organization's strategic goals
- Then planning how these goals are to be achieved/implemented

Regarding the first component, I observed that this is not normally regarded as an area for involvement by program/ project managers, even in the project management literature. This is in spite of the fact that there are significant exceptions in practice, notably in projectised organizations, but also some others. Although I argued in favour of involving program/project managers in this first component, I did not find a great deal of material in the literature to support the argument.

Regarding the second component, I noted that the project management literature has quite substantial materials on processes for planning achievement of the organizational goals via strategic portfolios, and thence via their component programs and projects. There is certainly sufficient material in the literature to make a strong case for the benefits of involving program/project managers in this work. However, senior managers in many organisations evidently remain unaware of the potential benefits of involving program/project managers in this second component, let alone the first.

Now, a recent paper by Usher 2013 in this journal discusses corporate strategy in the context of the more dynamic environments in which most organisations currently operate, and makes a strong case for involving program/project managers in corporate strategy at all stages. This note discusses Usher's contribution in this context.

TRADITIONAL AND NON-TRADITIONAL CORPORATE STRAGEGY MODELS

Traditional corporate strategy model

Usher 2013 says that traditional corporate strategic models assume that corporate strategy is developed by those at the top of the organisation, and are then handed down to those

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below to be implemented. (This is a good example of what has often been called an execution-only perception of program/project management).

This traditional corporate strategy model is essentially what I was talking about in the original paper. I argued that program/project managers should be involved from the start – which, in effect, was arguing against the execution-only approach. Now Usher 2013 has proposed a different model, which I have termed 'non-traditional'.

A non-traditional corporate strategy model

Usher 2013 argues that, in these days of economic instability, technological advances and rapidly changing internal and external environmental considerations, corporate strategy no longer has a three-to-five year window for implementation. Therefore, he says that corporate strategy

> …needs to be viewed as a temporary, adaptive process that can allow the quick allocation of a company's scarce resources to achieve co-alignment and congruence with its environment.

Under this non-traditional corporate strategy model, Usher suggests that

> …the development of a strategy is not separate or detached from the implementation of the strategy; instead, they form part of the same continuum.

If Usher is right about not separating the development of a strategy from its implementation in a fast-moving world, then this strongly reinforces the viewpoint that program/project managers should be involved in corporate strategy from the outset.

Usher had other insights which might help to further boost this argument. They revolve around the identification of certain similarities between corporate strategy and projects, and a practical model for linking the two.

SIMILARITIES BETWEEN, AND LINKING, CORPORATE STRATEGY AND PROJECTS

Usher finds several similarities between corporate strategy and project management. Using the PMBOK Guide's definition of a project, and the 'non-traditional' corporate strategy model, he finds that both are 'temporary endeavours', and that the purpose of both is to create a 'unique result'. He also discusses how many of the key disciplines of project management detailed in the PMBOK Guide are also applicable in the corporate strategy context, albeit in somewhat different ways.

Usher then develops the theme that both strategy development and projects follow somewhat similar life cycles (quoting from Mintzberg 1994 in relation to strategic development). Further (and perhaps most importantly in the context of this note), he points out that both involve progressive elaboration processes. Finally, Usher goes on to link corporate strategy and projects via a Progressive Elaboration Model of Corporate Strategy.

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This is quite a powerful model,

He concludes that

> The *Progressive Elaboration* model offers a new framework for viewing the corporate
> strategy-making process. It takes the existing disciplines of Project Management and
> demonstrates how they already align with the requirements of a changing corporate
> environment.

This leads Usher to his conclusion that senior executives should ask themselves if the time
has come for them to invite project management into their boardrooms (reflecting the title
of his paper).

SUMMARY/CONCLUSION

This note has added further materials to my original paper to support the argument that
program/project managers should be involved in corporate strategy from the outset.

Program/project managers are, of course, involved in implementing the strategies via
programs/projects. The original paper gives arguments from the literature for involving
them in plans to implement the strategies. Usher's paper essentially added the following
arguments for their involvement from the outset.

- Under Usher's 'non-traditional' corporate strategy model, which relates to dynamic
  corporate environments, the development of a strategy is not separate or detached
  from the implementation of the strategy. Therefore program/project managers should
  be involved in corporate strategy from the outset.

- Usher finds many similarities between corporate strategies and projects. In particular,
  both projects and corporate strategies have somewhat similar life cycles, and both
  involve progressive elaboration from a relatively broad beginning, through increasingly
  detailed development, to fully detailed implementation, and final review.

- The similarities found by Usher, coupled with the fact that progressive elaboration is
  very familiar to project managers, adds further weight to the argument for engaging
  them in the development of corporate strategy, as well as in its implementation.

However, these arguments are from a program/project perspective. They do not, in
themselves, solve the continuing problem that many, if not most, senior executive do not
see things that way. As Usher says (citing a study by Thomas et al 2002):

> …many senior executives believe that project management only has value when used
> for the execution of strategy.

So, it is one thing to preach to the converted, but it is quite another to convince unaware
senior managers of the potential benefits of such involvement – or, indeed, about

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involvement by program/project managers in other corporate arenas as well. To date, we do not seem to have done so well in these areas.

To help redress this, I suggested in my original paper that the project management community needs to develop and deploy comprehensive programs to promote broader awareness of its range of potential contributions to society at large, and to senior corporate executives in particular.
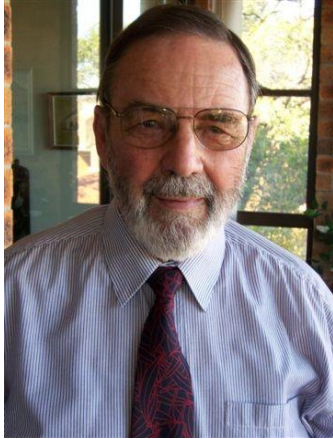
The insights by Usher should help bolster arguments which advocate having program/project management more involved in corporate strategy from the outset.

Finally, I want to thank Greg Usher for commenting on an earlier draft of this note.

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Alan Stretton is one of the pioneers of modern project management. He is currently a member of the Faculty Corps for the University of Management & Technology (UMT), USA. In 2006 he retired from a position as Adjunct Professor of Project Management in the Faculty of Design, Architecture and Building at the University of Technology, Sydney (UTS), Australia, which he joined in 1988 to develop and deliver a Master of Project Management program.   Prior to joining UTS, Mr. Stretton worked in the building and construction industries in Australia, New Zealand and the USA for some 38 years, which included the project management of construction, R&D, introduction of information and control systems, internal management education programs and organizational change projects. He has degrees in Civil Engineering (BE, Tasmania) and Mathematics (MA, Oxford), and an honorary PhD in strategy, programme and project management (ESC, Lille, France). Alan was Chairman of the Standards (PMBOK) Committee of the Project Management Institute (PMI®) from late 1989 to early 1992. He held a similar position with the Australian Institute of Project Management (AIPM), and was elected a Life Fellow of AIPM in 1996. He was a member of the Core Working Group in the development of the Australian National Competency Standards for Project Management. He has published over 120 professional articles and papers. Alan can be contacted at alanailene@bigpond.com.au.