
Advances in Project Management Series¹

Why planning is more important than plans

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Project management is intimately associated with the production of detailed plans, charts and schedules, constantly re-affirming Antoine de Saint-Exupery's belief that "a goal without a plan is just a wish."

Planning is generally considered to be a higher-level process concerned with 'how to initiate and execute the set of objectives'. Plans provide simulated maps of the unfolding future which act as baselines against which reality is assessed and expectations and achievements are monitored. Plans thus provide mechanisms for reasoning about actions independently of implementation.

Projects rely on static plans to overcome the inherent uncertainty and novelty associated with completing a task, with the underlying assumption that if planning can be done 'properly', the rest of the project will be easier to manage. Plans are therefore used to anticipate and predict circumstances allowing an organised deployment of resources.

The sixth edition of the APM Body of Knowledge positions planning as a key area under integrative management, explaining that "planning determines what is to be delivered, how much it will cost, when it will be delivered, how it will be delivered and who will carry it out".

The APM Body of Knowledge clarifies that following approval from senior management, the detailed documentation, referred to as the project plan, is prepared during the definition phase. This detailed documentation provides comprehensive answers to the following questions related to the delivery of the project: Why? What? How? Who? When? How much? Where?

The agreed management plan incorporating answers to the full set of questions provides the baseline, thereby forming the basis for gate reviews designed to assess the continuing validity of the work.

¹The *Advances in Project Management* series includes articles by authors of program and project management books published by Gower in the UK. Each month an introduction to the current monthly article is provided by series editor **Prof Darren Dalcher**, who is also the editor of the Gower *Advances in Project Management* series of books on new and emerging concepts in PM. For more on Gower project management, visit <http://www.gowerpublishing.com/default.aspx?page=2063>. See Darren's background summary at the end of this article.

So, what is wrong with detailed plans?

The Oxford English Dictionary defines a plan as (devising) a method of proceeding thought out in advance.

The underlying assumptions in conventional plans, are that: circumstances are frozen, change is limited, preferences cannot and do not alter, and expectations remain at the same level.

Brian Loasby (1967) notes that the term *plan* is overloaded and used in many confusing ways. He further asserts that the justification of planning as a way of improving communication is the reverse of the truth.

Given that planning implies gazing into the future, Loasby identifies three reasons that justify such an effort.

The first reason for looking into the future is to understand the future implications of present decisions. Loasby encourages scrutiny on a project-by-project basis to determine: what must be prepared in order to gain advantage from what is decided now; what will be the effect of current choices on the future; and, what problems may be created subsequently, by the current choices.

The second reason is to examine the present implications of future events. Specifically, the concern is with what needs to be decided now (and presumably subsequently), in order to be prepared for what is expected to happen. This consideration addresses the long-term commitment to change and the future.

The third reason is to provide the motivation and a mechanism to continue to ask the questions and re-visit the change agenda. Comparison of actual performance with plan may reveal problems and opportunities. A plan can also be used to secure commitment, albeit, to short term objectives.

However, Scanlan, Smith and Lawrence identify a *planning paradox*, whereby:

- Knowledge in the form of planning data, schedules, and dependencies is generated by the management domain
- The engineering domain frequently has an aversion to planning
- Consequently, there is limited input from technical specialists leading to limited product knowledge
- The resulting plans are too abstract, unrealistic and more likely to lead to failure
- The poor track record in meeting previous plans further reduces the interest in and confidence in the plans or the planning activities

The above is not helped by the application of dated project planning and scheduling methods and their reliance on classical dependency networks. Scanlan et al. note that dependency networks do not allow for feedback loops or iterations, and tend to enforce an overreliance on binary logic assuming full completion of a task before subsequent activities can commence.

Moreover, such classical approaches fail to acknowledge the complex, uncertain and dynamic nature of projects.

The role of planning

The irony of project management, especially in complex projects, is that forecasting and planning in new contexts is absolutely necessary, if completely impossible. If projects imply new undertakings in unstructured and unknown contexts, there is little hope of devising perfect plans.

“Here’s the paradox: there needs to be a plan, and the plan has to acknowledge that it will be departed from” – Rosabeth Moss Kanter (1998)

Other domains seem to concur. Dwight D. Eisenhower noted: “in preparing for battle I have always found that plans are useless, but planning is indispensable.” Winston Churchill similarly observed: “plans are of little importance, but planning is essential”.

Battles, like projects, involve multiple human participants, expectations, uncertainty, politics and other human foibles. Helmuth Karl Bernhard Graf von Moltke, the chief of staff of the Prussian Army for thirty years reasoned that “no (battle) plan survives contact with the enemy”. Each engagement changes the situation and leads to new reactions and responses so that no plan of operations can extend with any certainty beyond that first contact.

Given Nils Bohr assertion that ‘prediction is difficult, especially if it is about the future’, the detail needed to construct perfect plans may continue to allude, but the need to plan ahead and strategize remains crucial to success as planning allows participants to both probe the future and question the present.

Is detailed planning dangerous?

Loasby (1967), bemoans the fact that plans reduce flexibility, inhibit innovation, reduce response times and also divert attention away from flexibility. Planning needs to illuminate rather than obscure the existence and implications of uncertainty. Accordingly, Loasby calls for a shift of emphasis away from detailed action planning so that attention can be directed at planning the system and the decision process to better deal with the wider organisation and information.

In *Warning: activity planning is hazardous to your project’s health* Professor Erling Andersen agitates against the common practice of detailed activity planning. Many textbooks place the task of activity planning at the start of the project. That in turn obliges planners to foreknow all required activities and their dependencies in order to determine the critical path and derive the schedule and other project artefacts.

However, given that projects are unique and unprecedented undertakings dealing with unexplored domains, it would be impossible to identify the full range of activities during

the initial planning stage. In common with army generals, it is doubtful that project planners can foresee all potential encounters and all the steps that may be needed. More crucially, the results of earlier activities, or skirmishes, may require adjustments and potential improvements that are unforeseeable.

The problem with the classical approach is that focusing on activity planning draws attention away from the main results and objectives. Andersen offers an alternative focus on milestone planning, where milestones are defined in terms of results to be achieved (not completed activities). Milestones can define a particular condition or state, independently of the methods that may be utilised in order to achieve them. Milestones can be reached by different methods, and the key emphasis is on reaching a particular state. This approach encourages result-oriented thinking, allowing planners to gaze forward and negotiate major milestones and results.

In Plans are nothing, changing plans is everything: The impact of changes on project success Professors Dov Dvir and Thomas Lechler demonstrate that the positive total effect of the original quality of planning is almost completely overridden by the negative effect of goal changes. While plans may be important, the changing of plans is essential to the success of projects. Their empirical research confirms that the combined effect of essential goal changes, and the required adjustments to the plan (to accommodate new circumstances and conditions, including delays, strikes, weather conditions etc.), makes a much bigger difference to overall success than the original plan.

Planning for the future?

British Naval historian and author of the best selling *Parkinson's Law*, C. Northcote Parkinson noted that "perfection of planning is a symptom of decay".

Parkinson observed that attempts to perfect planning characterised institutions in decline and asserted that this paradox was well supported by a wealth of archaeological and historical research proving that the luxury of perfect planning can only occur during periods of decay.

"During a period of exciting discovery or progress there is no time to plan the perfect headquarter. The time for that comes later, when all the important work has been done. Perfection, we know, is finality; and finality is death" – C. Northcote Parkinson

Planning will never be perfect; and the required investment is hard to justify. American writer and journalist Allen Saunders observed that "life is what happens to you while you're busy making other plans." Change is an inevitable part of life, and undertakings involving other parties require a certain degree of mutual adjustment and re-adjustment as we proceed.

Most organisations do not have the attention and time to perfect planning, and nor do they have the gift of perfect foresight. This month's article by Dr. Mike Lauder reflects on the role of foresight in the context of projects. The article draws on Mike's book *In pursuit of foresight: Disaster incubation theory re-imagined*, published by Gower. The

article reminds us that our situated contexts are replete with change and complexity. It also encourages managers to consider their involvement in the planning and development process. More importantly, it provides us with a new set of questions and issues of interest to consider when looking into the future and trying to understand our present.

The book makes an important contribution to safety and disaster research as well as to organisational theory. Many inquiries blame executives for failures of foresight, offering limited, if any, guidance. Mike's book offers the first steps to developing foresight capability. His perspective combines relevant insights from multiple disciplines and approaches. The findings distil lessons from many formal inquiries into a manageable and actionable set that can be used to challenge any perspective. Yet, perhaps the greatest value is in charting his learning journey and the development of his questioning attitude through a relentless effort to make sense of his context.

Delivering through planning

Projects force us to deal with the future, often requiring forays into great uncertainty. They involve guesses, approximations and adjustments as we endeavour to make sense of what may be.

"What is a good ... plan? There is none. But there is a good planning process. ... Flexibility is the necessary watchword. Sound thinking and debate about the future, marked by the asking of novel questions, foster flexibility of thought and action"

– Tom Peters (1987)

Perfect plans are not required in order to engage with a future. Initial efforts at planning represent an understanding of projected milestones that can be reached or established in the journey towards improvement. Plans that do not survive engagement with change, reality, the enemy, or projects, are simply first approximations and sketches of intention.

"Too much planning can lead to paralysis, indecision and collapse. Organisations that are locked in a rigid change 'schedule' of planned goals and events may find themselves following something that no longer meets their evolving needs, much less those of the world around them. Indeed pre-programmed models may be unrealistic; instead companies could remain true to the goals of the change, but be flexible about the means"

– Moss Kanter et al. (1992)

The value derived from planning is not found in the artefact, the complete plan, but emerges from the act of planning itself. Planning is not simply about selecting one future, keeping an open mind entails comprehension of more than one possibility. The physical production of a detailed plan, is therefore incidental in a fast-changing environment. The act of planning however, reveals insights, establishes effective feedback mechanisms that are used for subsequent adjustments, and obtains a familiarity with the situation that entrenches it into a reflective, responsive mode.

“Failed plans should not be interpreted as a failed vision. Visions don't change, they are only refined. Plans rarely stay the same, and are scrapped or adjusted as needed. Be stubborn about the vision, but flexible with your plan.”

– John C. Maxwell

Insistence on perfect plans prior to engagement is futile. In delivering projects, designing, making decisions and planning go hand in hand. Innovation implies discovery and new insights, which in turn may suggest new detours, diversions and discoveries.

Moreover, Karl Weick (1979) proposed that plans were important as symbols, advertisements, games, and excuses for interaction, rather than for any of the traditional reasons.

Planning for the journey (as opposed to planning the perfect journey) would require a new capability for foresight, and a willingness to engage with, adapt and respond to change and emerging opportunities whilst maintaining the pursuit of a dream or vision. With the benefit of foresight, informed planning can enable progressive elaboration through stages, places and milestones towards the delivery of a honed and refined vision in a fast changing reality.

As we embrace new ways of bringing forward our vision of reality, so must we also continue to reflect on the traditions that have brought us thus far, whilst acknowledging the fundamental difference between the plan as an intermediary artefact and the continuous act of planning.

The final word on the topic goes to *Peachum, Brecht's beggar king in “Song on the Inadequacy of Human Enterprise”*:

*Go make yourself a plan
And be a shining light.
Then make yourself another plan,
For neither will come right.*

–Bertolt Brecht

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Editor's note: Darren Dalcher is the editor of the series of books on Advances in Project Management published by Gower in the UK. Information about the Gower series can be found at <http://www.gowerpublishing.com/advancesinprojectmanagement>. The above article is an introduction to the invited paper this month by another Gower author. You can find previously published articles by Prof Dalcher and Gower authors at www.pmworldlibrary.net.

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Darren Dalcher, Ph.D. HonFAPM, FRSA, FBCS, CITP, FCMI is Professor of Project Management at the University of Hertfordshire, and founder and Director of the National Centre for Project Management (NCPM) in the UK. He has been named by the Association for Project Management (APM) as one of the top 10 “movers and shapers” in project management in 2008 and was voted Project Magazine’s “Academic of the Year” for his contribution in “integrating and weaving academic work with practice”. Following industrial and consultancy experience in managing IT projects, Professor Dalcher gained his PhD in Software Engineering from King's College, University of London. Professor Dalcher has written over 150 papers and book chapters on project management and software engineering. He is Editor-in-Chief of *Software Process Improvement and Practice*, an international journal focusing on capability, maturity, growth and improvement. He is the editor of the book series, *Advances in Project Management*, published by Gower Publishing of a new companion series *Fundamentals of Project Management*.

Heavily involved in a variety of research projects and subjects, Professor Dalcher has built a reputation as leader and innovator in the areas of practice-based education and reflection in project management. He works with many major industrial and commercial organisations and government bodies in the UK and beyond. He is an Honorary Fellow of the APM, a Chartered Fellow of the British Computer Society, a Fellow of the Chartered Management Institute, and the Royal Society of Arts, and a Member of the Project Management Institute (PMI), the Academy of Management, the Institute for Electrical and Electronics Engineers, and the Association for Computing Machinery. He is a Chartered IT Practitioner. He is a Member of the PMI Advisory Board responsible for the prestigious David I. Cleland project management award and of the APM Professional Development Board. Prof Dalcher is an editorial advisor for the *PM World Journal*. He can be contacted at d.dalcher2@herts.ac.uk.

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