Advances in Project Management Series\textsuperscript{1}

From Projects to Strategy, and Back Again

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Introduction to the February 2013 Advances in PM Series Article

One of the key success factors for project management revolves around the availability of support and buy-in from senior management. Reports on project success and failure typically emphasise executive support as a distinguishing and necessary ingredient.

Embedding major improvement initiatives, such as maturity models and process improvement schemes, into an organisation also depends on harnessing support at a strategic level which is often identified as a critical pre-requisite to the success of such initiatives. Indeed, most attempts to introduce and embed change at an organisational level would depend on the availability of leaders willing to engage, defend, support and champion the initiatives to ensure they survive and thrive.

The discipline is increasingly aware of the need to ‘sell’ project management to corporate executives. In a landmark study published in 2002, Professor Janice Thomas and her colleagues asked why it was so difficult to convince senior executives of the importance of project management. Their PMI study confirms that many project managers pitch the profession too low by focusing on the tactical importance of projects. Senior executives however, are looking for a more strategic focus, concerned with the long-term delivery of value. The study notes that successful sellers emphasise the alignment of project management with corporate strategy and goals and distinct value statements. Ultimately senior executives want to understand the benefits that project management can offer in their particular context.

A number of articles in the series, including the most recent installment, hinted that the theory of project management might be flawed, suggesting alternative ways of looking at how to deliver projects. It might be that the discipline is partly at fault for failing to transmit the correct message. Describing a project as a temporary endeavour with a start and end points, might well be doing the discipline a disservice, by ignoring the need to focus on benefits, the alignment with corporate objectives, and the strategic and organisational context. Presenting projects as a temporary group activity or as the allocation of resources also misses the wider purpose and goal, and more crucially

\textsuperscript{1}The 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 currently 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.
ignores the link to upper level values, priorities and concerns that are likely to be of interest to senior executives.

The depiction of project management as a simplistic approach that can be executed in six quick steps available in a DIY self-help style book, or the random allocation of the title of project manager in shows such as the Apprentice may also be underselling the promise of project management. Recent conversations with senior executives, have suggested that the impression of an execution-focused tactical undertaking seems to resonate with their experiences of the discipline and what it can offer. In order to sell project management to senior executives professionals would need to use the right language, set the right expectations, and have the right level of conversation.

Within the discipline of project management one increasingly hears about the new world, and the new challenges that are encountered. One of the key challenges is to embed project management successfully in organisations. The article by Antonio Nieto-Rodriguez gives an encouragement for re-thinking the role and value of project management. His article attempts to make sense of the way project management is perceived by looking at the views of some of the most recognised management gurus, the leading MBA programmes and the leading management publications. His conclusion is that project management needs to become more relevant to the concerns of senior leaders in order to justify its inclusion.

The contribution is extracted from Antonio’s recent book: The Focused Organization: How Concentrating on a Few Key Initiatives can Dramatically Improve Strategy Execution published by Gower. The book makes a persuasive case for fewer and more effectively selected and managed projects that will form the key to strategic and long-term success in organisations. By focusing on a number of key initiatives, organisations can perform significantly better than unfocused organisations, delivering improved performance that translates into the delivery of strategic objectives, motivated staff, and financial benefits. The book will challenge project managers to look at organisations through two very different dimensions, which need to be balanced to deliver successful strategy execution.

Perhaps the two key contributions of the work are in posing the searching questions (and providing a set of potential answers) and in offering a new vocabulary that can underpin a new culture and support the conversation with senior executives to ensure that project management can be rightly viewed as an essential and effective strategic discipline.

The Chinese military strategist and philosopher, Sun Tzu noted that “All men can see these tactics whereby I conquer, but what none can see is the strategy out of which victory is evolved”.

The conversation required to successfully embed project management within organisations needs to be informed by a recognition of the strategic objectives, values, and preferences of organisations so that outcomes can better reflect strategic objectives. By joining the conversation project management can become a meaningful partner in strategic execution and corporate value delivery, and in the process obtain senior strategic support and perhaps begin to improve its track record of delivery, the
underlying expectations in senior circles, and the perception and visibility of the discipline.

Indeed, as the discipline seeks to move from doing to shaping, it must embrace a greater focus on objectives, intentions and purpose, and begin to enact a perspective of active, responsible and effective project leadership, rather than mere and efficient project execution or passive management.

References:


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 in the PMWJ by Gower author Michael Hatfield on the subject of “The Coming Sea-Change in Project Management Science.” You can find previously published articles by Prof Dalcher and Gower authors at www.pmworldlibrary.net.
About the Author

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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 academic editorial advisor for the PM World Journal. He can be contacted at d.dalcher2@herts.ac.uk.