
Advances in Project Management Series¹

The sprint or the marathon?

Finding a metaphor to account for value in projects and programmes

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A metaphor is a powerful instrument: Metaphors enable individuals, groups, organisations and society in general to create, shape and share understanding. The mental model associated with a metaphor establishes the images, rules, names, associations and links connected to a topic, whilst also creating boundaries by excluding the unimportant and irrelevant.

Metaphors impact the way we think, what we see and how we do things. Shared metaphors encompass tacit understanding, thereby embodying many of the premises and assumptions that are never uttered. The choice of metaphor will influence the problem formulation, and subsequently, the solution that emerges. It is therefore important to select the right metaphor.

A metaphor represents a single and rather limited perspective on a situation, thereby bringing out a similarly limited meaning. Karl Weick observed that organisations have a major hand in creating the realities, which they then view as ‘facts’ to which they must accommodate. This ultimately becomes the lens through which the world around us is observed as they are used to engage, understand and organise the world around us.

The project as a sprint

Projects share many common features with a sprint. A sprint is an intense run executed over a short distance at (or very close to) top speed. The intensive nature of the undertaking, aimed at quickly reaching a target or a goal, makes for a compelling race at peak performance.

The sprint is likely to have a starting block and a delineated finish line. The intense nature of the undertaking carried out between the starting point and finish line, and the intense and all-consuming focus on the activity itself invoke a similarity to dedicated and concentrated project work.

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 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.*

Human physiological limitations dictate that the pace of such a race can only be maintained over a short distance. While many projects display a sprint-like race features there is an increasing tendency to focus on short-term projects that last over a short period. Indeed, agile projects, which also utilise the sprint terminology to depict an intense short-term undertaking, increasingly focus on dedicated delivery cycles lasting two weeks, or even less. However, such single-minded focus can also prove to be limiting.

In search of a more encompassing metaphor

Wider ideas within the management of projects space challenge the short-term hegemony associated with the pursuit of a sprint metaphor. In particular, considerations related to the adoption of extended life cycles, encompassing system use, realisation of benefits, delivery of value, consideration of environmental impacts and sustainability, and the adoption of enterprise and organisational perspectives require a wider frame. Projects results persist beyond handover, contributing to the accumulation of benefits, the consideration of safe decommissioning and environmental impact, the concept of operation and usage, and the delivery of organisational value. Indeed, it would appear that project and programme work often extends beyond the confines of a rapid sprint race invoking the vision of an extended and sustained marathon.

Projects as marathons

Marathons have a lot in common with sprints. They are both Olympic events, which rely on running. Both have a starting line, participants geared up for the event and a finishing line (end goal or purpose). Both are intense, but in very different ways.

What happens between the start and finish points is very different and requires a distinctive strategy and perspective. A sprint entails a very intense but short burst of effort. The starting position and stance make a huge difference given the limited extent of the course. An early mistake, or an initial stumble, would be difficult to recover from requiring good positioning and a perfect start straight off the blocks. Starting right is an essential skill and capability, especially in a short distance race, given the impact that it can have on the entire undertaking.

Marathons, on the other end, are run over an extended period. While a good start is still useful, there is plenty of time to catch up and adjust to conditions. The trick is to sustain performance levels over an extended period and pace the work rate. Resilience and perseverance are essential to completing the course.

When we think about long terms impacts of projects and programmes, the delivery of benefits and the value that accrues from such realisation, we are adopting a long-term perspective. The marathon metaphor deemphasises handover as an intermediate milestone along a much longer race with a longer-term perspective. A marathon is more akin to accumulated lifetime value rather than immediate short-term goals. If we want to think about projects and programmes as investments, we need to adopt a marathon

inspired frame of mind that allows for the accrual of value from multiple benefit streams over time.

Delivering projects and programmes in such an environment requires a different mindset, and a range of new skills. In addition to endurance and resilience, marathons require constant progress. Maintaining a sustainable pace will avoid the risk of burn out associated with short-term project rush. Avoiding the tendency to sprint ahead necessitates a way of pacing the effort, and tracking progress, whilst monitoring the cumulative value being delivered over the extended marathon.

Refocusing on value

Value is an interesting, yet deeply misunderstood commodity. Amongst the many definitions for value, The Oxford Dictionary includes: Money or other commodity considered equivalent or enabling an exchange; the worth, desirability, usefulness, importance or utility of a thing; or, the ability of a thing to serve a purpose or cause an effect. The various project management bodies of knowledge do not tend to emphasise value as a standalone topic preferring instead to place it as a monitoring and control mechanism. This typically implies the adoption of an earned value management approach to determining progress.

Given the different interpretations and meaning of value, it is surprising that the project management profession has limited itself to earned value, primarily concerned with the difference between planned value and actual value, eschewing value engineering, value management and other value related approaches.

With a widening concentration on project investments and the impact of change programmes, organisations are looking for new ways to track Return On Investment (ROI) and map the levels of value realisation. Long ignored techniques devised by value practitioners offer potential to extend traditional approaches and develop informed project-wide intelligence about accrued and added value.

This month's invited article by Roger Davies and Roel Wolfert makes a strong case for extending earned value through the use of value tracking, benefits tracking and deliverables tracking to gain meaningful insights into value realisation. The article draws on the book *Value Management: Translating Aspirations into Performance*, by Roger Davies and Adam Davies published by Gower.

The book makes an important contribution in offering an approach for defining critical drivers of value, justifying investments, managing the returns and tracking benefits and value. The book weaves together multiple concepts related to performance management and measurement to develop an integrated perspective about value. By incorporating dynamic modelling, systems thinking, balanced scorecards and business intelligence it offers a better-informed basis for reasoning about investment decisions, impact assessment and the management of value, thereby enabling the development of a new value-informed project management.

The article distils the ideas addressed in the book by making the case for a fundamentally new way of approaching change initiatives and implementing an improved approach to addressing value in project and programmes.

Winning with value...

Many organisations collect growing volumes of data about their projects. Yet, to deliver projects, programmes and change efforts successfully they require the right approaches to addressing the right value aspects of projects over an extended time horizon. Value management employed in a marathon perspective offers a good start.

Success in projects and programmes is less to do with completing the sprint as fast as possible, as longer-term implications and value considerations come into play. The marathon world requires endurance and enables exploitation of emerging opportunities. Success is ultimately judged in the long term, and hence the winner of the first 50, 100 or 200 meters in a marathon hardly deserves a mention. Those prepared for the long haul can leave the 'sprinters' to burn out and drop out.

Success and value delivery are both a long-term engagement. Business entrepreneur and founder of Walmart, Sam Walton, wryly noted that like most other overnight successes, Walmart was 20 years in the making. The marathon view allows one to consider the accumulation of benefits to consider the overall value of an asset or initiative.

The adoption of new metaphors or perspectives enables us to reason about projects and success in novel ways. Considering the marathon as opposed to or as well as the sprint, can support the development of long term thinking that can accommodate growth, improvement, embracing of opportunities and the delivery of value through benefits.

Maturity is typically achieved when a person is willing to postpone immediate pleasure for long-term gain. Psychological experiments confirm that children take a while to reach that position. Yet, this is how value can emerge over time. The pursuit of long-term gain and the occasional use of the marathon perspective in preference to the sprint may prove to be part of the development of a maturing discipline searching for intelligent and elegant new solutions to persistently wicked problems.

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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.peworldlibrary.net.

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