

## **In Search of Project Management Nirvana<sup>1 2</sup>**

Paul C. Dinsmore

What looms next on the horizon of project management? Where is it all headed? Is there no end to the rampant scope creep assailing the field? What will the profession eventually encompass?

The profession has been in constant mutation since the dawn of modern project management in the 1950s. From its most simplistic form of a single project like building a shelter from storms, to dealing with multiple and complex initiatives in ever-changing environments such as high-tech space exploration, project management broadened to a state of organizational entanglement that requires a rock-solid set of policies, structure, guidelines and procedures to herd along that the plethora of projects that often butt heads at stampede-like pace to meet desired goals. Here are some of the ways projects are handled in organizations:

1. **Laissez Faire** (whatever will be, will be). Projects are carried out as required using intuitive approaches or methodologies that vary from one project to another. Nobody knows how many projects are underway in the company or the status of all the projects.
2. **Departmental** (territorial). Each department or area develops methodology and practice appropriate for that department. No cross-fertilization exists with other departments.
3. **PMOs, Project Management Offices** (one or several). Some companies have multiple PMOs, either at different levels or different regions. They are sometimes connected, yet often operate independently.
4. **Corporate Level PMO** (top down oversight). Here, a chief project officer, or corporate project management office, or strategic project management office, cares for the implementation of strategic projects and for the overall project management practice in the company, including project portfolio management.
5. **Enterprise Project Governance (EPG)**. (all-encompassing organizational approach). EPG proposes a broad approach to the management of projects across an enterprise, involving all players, including board members, CEO, other C-level executives, portfolio managers, PMO managers and project managers.

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## **So is Governance the Ultimate Level for Project Management?**

EPG is a framework residing under the umbrella of top management and corporate governance aimed at ensuring the alignment of the corporate portfolio and its programs and projects with overall strategy, and that actions are pro-actively taken to confirm that everything stays on track to ultimately create value for the organization.

Enterprise project governance is designed to meet a crying need: to find a way to deal intelligently and efficiently with the numerous projects and programs demanded by the marketplace, evolving technology, company stakeholders, regulatory agencies and the quest to innovate - all of this, to be done with limited resources and at record-making speed. EPG presents an orderly and effective organizational approach for dealing with these critical issues.

### **But What's Next?**

Assuming the trend continues towards broader views like EPG for managing projects across organizations, where might the quest for a comprehensive holistic view end up? Clearly the leading project management organizations recognize the growing movement. PMI expanded its vision from the pioneering single-project view portrayed in the PMBOK to include norms and standards of increasingly broadened scope, such as portfolios, programs and maturity models. European-based IPMA, International Project Management Association, has long taken the view in its Competence Baseline, that project management includes substantial organizational, contextual and behavioral components.

So if we ride the present drift, above and beyond enterprise project governance, where is the profession headed? Is there another level? Perhaps some sort of project management nirvana, or glorious stage of organizational enlightenment? Or maybe something like Total Project Management, where all people live and breathe the principles of project management and change through project management is dealt with routinely and naturally by stakeholders.

### **Meanwhile**

In the meantime, until such a new enlightened stage unfolds, lots of room exists for further development along the five approaches listed above. Each of these classic looks at project management, stand to gain from upgrading their present approaches. Here's how project management effectiveness can be boosted in each of the organizational settings:

*Laissez faire* management may fare well provided projects are few in number and hero-level project managers are at the helm of the projects. In other circumstances, more structure and process through a PMO, is called for in order for the organization to move up the project maturity scale.

The *departmental* way of managing projects is effective within given organizational microcosms, like IT and Engineering where departmental PMOs are helpful in guaranteeing best practice. To be further effective, the departments require reaching out to other areas in the organization to consolidate common practices and create a broad project management culture.

*PMOs* are the stanchions for project management methodology and support in organizations. In terms of authority and responsibility, however, their postures vary, from the timid to the proud and powerful. Power wielded by a PMO, however, is less important than its effectiveness in supporting and facilitating projects to meet company goals. Effective PMOs are those that evolve and upgrade themselves constantly and strive to embrace and spread the best practices of project management on an organizational basis.

The *corporate-level PMO* views projects strategically, as they are selected, evolve, and are brought to fruition. Since this level CPO resides in the upper echelons of organizations, it has access to decision makers and can greatly increase overall project management effectiveness through portfolio management, standardization of methodologies, acquisition of technologies and providing training on a corporate-wide basis.

*Enterprise Project Governance*, in theory, stands the best chance of coming close to project management nirvana, since it's holistic in its organizational view of projects. The challenge in EPG involves overcoming the cultural hurdles and turf challenges that stand in the way of the concept from becoming fully effective. Persistence, top-level support and a long-range strategies are the key elements for EPG to carry an organization towards project management nirvana.

Full-fledged nirvana in project management, where all stakeholders are bathed and anointed with fulfillment and joy, may not be fully attainable, but it's an admirable dream to pursue. And giant steps in that direction are possible in each of the classic project management organizational settings. The destination "project management nirvana" is not as important as the professional journey towards that goal. And that journey will surely spawn improved practices, evolution and improved results for the company's overall portfolio of projects.

## About the Author



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**Paul C. Dinsmore** is an international speaker, executive coach and consultant on project management and organizational issues. He has authored or co-authored 20 management books, and has written more than one hundred professional papers and articles. Mr. Dinsmore is Board President of DinsmoreCompass, a training and consulting group focused on consulting, outsourcing, training, coaching and IT support. Prior to establishing his consulting practice in 1985, he worked for twenty years as a project manager and executive in the construction and engineering industry.

Mr. Dinsmore has performed consulting and training services for major companies including IBM, ENI-Italy, Petrobrás, General Electric, Mercedes Benz, Shell, Morrison Knudsen, the World Trade Institute, Westinghouse, Ford, Caterpillar, and Alcoa. His speaking and consulting practice has taken him to Europe, South America, South Africa, Japan, China, and Australia. The range of projects where Mr. Dinsmore has provided consulting services include company reorganization, project start-up, and training programs, as well as advisory and coaching functions for the presidents of major organizations. He participates actively in the Project Management Institute, which awarded him its Distinguished Contributions Award as well as the prestigious title of Fellow of the Institute.

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