

## The Road to Responsible Collaboration<sup>1</sup>

### Part 1 Series Introduction<sup>2</sup>

Robin Hornby

*Summary: In this series, Robin Hornby argues that the effectiveness of project management is improved by driving project responsibility into the organization and creating conditions favorable to 'responsible collaboration'. But this collaborative environment will not fall naturally into place without the support of senior management and the adoption of enabling frameworks, guidelines, and techniques. In this introductory article, Robin defines the terminology and concepts central to the series, explains the two themes that inspire collaborative working, and outlines the articles to follow.*

#### Introduction

I want to describe a new way to look at projects. A way that has at its heart two themes - collaborative project engagement, and business alignment. They are closely related, and ultimately result in what I call a Delivery Organization. This organization-centric concept of project management (PM) acknowledges the obvious – corporate projects operate in a corporate environment which can be favorable or unfavorable. A favorable environment offers higher productivity and, with good intentions, may foster responsible collaboration. But good intentions are not enough, and a roadmap for owners and providers is essential. It modifies how the project is managed, but the principles of sound PM do not change. Many responsibilities and related activities of the project manager (the PM) become collaborative, and the PM transforms from cajoler, conciliator, and issuer of directives to organizer and facilitator of a natural and anticipated process.

#### Concepts and Terminology

**Universality:** The prescriptions for collaboration are designed to be universal, i.e., apply regardless of an inhouse or vendor provider. A common language and process for project teams helps avoid silos, regardless of how they are sourced. (This does not mean that vendors do not face unique problems, they certainly do, and the interested reader may investigate my earlier book, *Commercial Project Management*<sup>1</sup>, for a complete analysis.)

**Owner:** Generic, universal name for the beneficiary of the project. It embraces specific terms such as buyer, client, sponsor, steering committee, or business team.

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<sup>1</sup> Editor's note: This series of articles is by Robin Hornby, author of four books including *A Concise Guide to Project Collaboration: Building a Delivery Organization* (Routledge 2023) and *Commercial Project Management: A Guide for Selling and Delivering Professional Services* (Routledge 2017). Learn more about the author in his profile at the end of this article.

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**Provider:** Generic, universal name for the organization providing the technical team and delivering the project, who may be inhouse or contracted.

**Delivery Organization:** A collective term for both the owner and provider who have adopted the collaborative themes of project engagement and alignment.

**Responsible Collaboration:** This usually abbreviates to collaboration, but I mean something very specific. The qualifier strengthens the simple idea of 'working together', which is the dictionary definition. It also helps correct the prevalent notion that stakeholders have rights, but no corresponding duties and responsibilities. The word has been used historically to describe the usual circumstance of the PM working collaboratively with the team. This just requires the common-sense to consult prior to decision-making, to listen to ideas, to ensure tasks are assigned with care and amended based on feedback, that results are valued, and everyone is treated respectfully. The word has also been applied to non-hierarchical self-directed teams which may or may not be collaborative but in most cases are no way to run a project. All these ideas are discussed elsewhere in the literature and are not my concern.

**Collaborative Project Engagement:** This usually abbreviates to engagement, a realisation of responsible collaboration between owner and provider to engage in joint administrative and management practices. These areas have suffered unnecessarily from discord, impediments, inaccuracies, and omissions arising from owner discouragement or non-participation.

**Alignment:** Used generically, this term is simply defined as a 'position of agreement or alliance' and refers to the owner/provider relationship. It subsumes complexities such as the project and provider's corporate alignment, and the very specific issue of the project's alignment with the business. This is singled out for special attention and may be interpreted as an owner and provider committed to complementary work to meet an agreed objective, respecting the primacy of business interests. The reality of differing motivations is usually manageable.

## **A Meaningful Definition of Project Management**

As our intent is to advance PM, a good place to start our discussion is with a more detailed definition.

PM is fundamentally a method of getting work done. Most of us think PM is usually (though not always) the best way. Why is that? A truly explanatory definition of PM is required:

***Project management is a structured approach to plan, organize, control, and lead the work of the project to meet project objectives.***

This isolates all the elements which, if lacking, mean there is no true project. It gives an accurate and succinct depiction of what the PM does. Tellingly, it says nothing about the project context, although planning, organizing, controlling, and leading do not occur in a vacuum. So, in a corporate context (the most common) it is self-evident that the people who have both a role on the project *and* a functional position in the organization, must

engage with the project and collectively shape it for success. If corporate and project goals are aligned, they will see both roles as equally important. Unfortunately, nearly all the implied responsibilities are delegated to the PM, who will end up feeling disempowered and frustrated. This provides a valuable insight into how PM should advance.

### **Dimensions of Alignment**

The influence and discipline of project management must be pushed further into the organization. Corporate participants are more likely to contribute to the project objectives if they are aligned. They will understand and accept coordination and the implied activities if they are aligned. A business leader will engage in collaborative procedures and behaviours if they know their interests are being served.

Alignment enables responsible collaboration. Specifically, business alignment encourages owner engagement, so long as the provider reacts to business interests and the owner responds to obligations. These adaptations may require negotiation. This is crucial to the goal of mature PM - a Delivery Organization. The actions required are mutual:

First, the provider pays more attention to business priorities, describes the project using owner language, and communicates status using owner decision-making information - primarily financials and risk. Both parties adopt a new business-oriented framework for the life of the project and stop using the technical project lifecycle for business communication, which is not its design purpose. Typically, the owner does not care whether the team is prototyping or coding, or how many agile iterations they have worked through!

Secondly, there are obligations for the owner. The owner appoints a sponsor who accepts responsibility for championing the project with fellow executives, owning the project charter, overseeing execution through a steering committee, making financial and executive decisions, and harvesting the business benefits. The owner also ensures the fulfilment of business responsibilities, namely, implementing the new business procedures and any reorganization needed to obtain the benefits. The owner also recognizes the autonomy of the PM to execute and control the technical development and implementation.

Finally, the parties agree on the principle that stakeholders can express their needs and wants, as is their right, but must expect to be a part of collaborative project engagement. They can be assured that collaboration enhances project productivity without compromising legitimate business negotiation.

### **Conclusion**

There is clearly a need for guidance, specific techniques, and methods to build this collaborative environment. It is a corporate management responsibility, long ignored, as they traditionally hand all responsibilities to the PM, who only has authority over the project team. I was impelled to write my recent book, *A Concise Guide to Project Collaboration*<sup>2</sup>, to fill this gap. It is aimed at corporate managers, not just the PMs.

Managers need to understand the concept and its benefits. Then they must give their authority for implementation to the PMs, who will need a description of the techniques and methods.

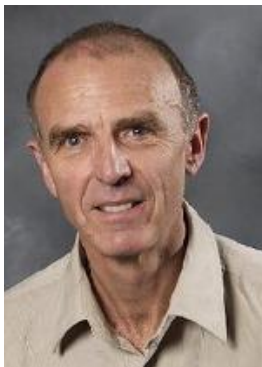
### Future Articles

Forthcoming articles will discuss techniques used to obtain alignment, followed by the identification of specific drivers to push the influence of PM further into the organization, analogous to an evolutionary process. Subsequent articles will discuss collaborative project engagement and the barriers commonly encountered, and will present frameworks that support this new environment. We will conclude with practical recommendations on how to build the Delivery Organization.

### References

- 1 Hornby, Robin. 2017. *Commercial Project Management: A Guide to Selling and Delivering Professional Services*, Routledge. <https://www.routledge.com/Commercial-Project-Management-A-Guide-for-Selling-and-Delivering-Professional/Hornby/p/book/9781138237681>
  - 2 Hornby, Robin. 2023. *A Concise Guide to Project Collaboration: Building a Delivery Organization*, Routledge (Focus Series). <https://www.routledge.com/A-Concise-Guide-to-Project-Collaboration-Building-a-Delivery-Organization/Hornby/p/book/9781032435459>,
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### About the Author



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**Robin Hornby** worked in Information Technology for over 40 years, taught project management at Mount Royal University for 12 years and maintained a consulting practice. He worked across Canada and internationally, was a long-time holder of the PMP designation, and presented frequently at PMI symposia. He pioneered many delivery management practices and is the author of four books. His latest book titled [A Concise Guide to Project Collaboration: Building a Delivery Organization](#) was published in 2023 by Routledge. For more information, visit [www.tmipm.com](http://www.tmipm.com). Robin Hornby can be contacted at [rhornby@shaw.ca](mailto:rhornby@shaw.ca)