

How to select the most suitable project management approach? ¹

This eye-opening simple exercise will give all the clues to take this key decision as a project manager (and not to regret afterwards)

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Abstract

In this article, the author tells a personal story where he learned essential keys to select the most suitable approach among predictive, adaptive, or hybrid methodologies: understanding the project's context and performing a simple eye-opening exercise called "light and darkness". This simple yet effective method provides the necessary clarity to make informed decisions and progress confidently towards project execution.

Body of Article

I was definitely excited! I was initiating my journey in the project management world and, after some experiences as a team member, I received the message that I would be assigned to lead my first project as a project manager.

Leading a project and having the opportunity to make an idea come true, what a step! Reflecting on that, I thought I had a good education, I had received a proper training and I had been involved in several projects and teams in different sectors, so preparation was under control.

However, something worried me as I became more aware about my role as project manager; according to the project management methodology, one of the first decisions to be taken (and certainly a relevant one) was the approach to manage the project: predictive, adaptive or hybrid.

I perfectly knew the theory, no doubt about it; I was aware of the difference between those methodologies, but the issue was that I had never been in the position to face such key decision in real life. Should I just apply the theory? was there an effective method used by experienced project leaders? what if I made a wrong decision leading to a complete project failure as a consequence?

These and other questions came to my mind when I decided to talk about it with Maite, a long-time project manager, who was always willing to help.

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I asked her about my doubts to select the most appropriate approach for each project; Maite had gone through the same situation years ago and gave me some useful clues that for sure would lead me to take a more robust decision, would save me a lot of time and would place me on the right track from the beginning:

1) The most appropriate development approach always depends on the context and on the characteristics of your project

The decision might not be the same to all the projects because all of them are different; instead, you need to consider your own project, with its specific characteristics, context, product or service, processes, customer, stakeholders, deliverables and everything that might be relevant to that project to be successful.

What is the best method? "It depends", Maite answered me.

Tailoring and adaptation are basic principles in modern project management.

2) "Light and Darkness" exercise

Once this analysis was done, Maite invited him to perform the simple "light and darkness" exercise, which consists of going through four imaginary scenarios and takes about five minutes to complete.

By connecting the feelings felt during each scenario and mapping them with the characteristics of each approach, a project manager would gain the necessary information to confidently select the most suitable methodology to manage the project (predictive, adaptive or hybrid).

Questions and answers below are included as a representation of how this exercise could look like, but similar other questions and answers might be also possible:

1. Scenario 1

Imagine you must deliver something and, in order to do so, you have to walk through a dark corridor, completely dark, where you have never been before:

- *Question:* How would you move in that unknown dark corridor, would you move or stand still, would you move fast or slow, would you move confidently or cautiously, walking at small steps?
- *Answer:* first I would try to see whether some light appears somewhere, then I would continue, step by step, even touching the walls, with very small steps; I would put my hand on my head in case I get hit, I might be afraid of what might appear, I would think and evaluate carefully the situation before taking each of the steps, I might ask someone out loud to turn on the light...

2. Scenario 2

Now, imagine the same dark corridor but with the difference that you already know it as you have been there before, it is not your first time in that place:

- *Question:* How would you move in that known dark corridor, would you move the same way or with the same speed as in the unknown dark corridor (Scenario 1), would you be more confident, would you be less cautious, less nervous?
- *Answer:* I would keep walking step by step, slowly, touching the walls, with small steps, although less cautiously than in Scenario 1; as I have been there before, I would know how to assess where I am and what is ahead even though I would be not actually seeing it. I would feel more confident and safer, I would walk less slowly, with more rhythm and I could even find where the light switch is in case I need to turn it on.

3. Scenario 3

Now imagine a corridor that you don't know but where a brilliant light enters, the space is clear and diaphanous; it is your first time there, but you have visibility of what you have ahead:

- *Question:* How would you move in that unfamiliar corridor, would you move the same way as in the dark corridor, would you be more confident, quicker and feel safer because there is light in it?
- *Answer:* I would feel more confident because I would see where I am and the light would allow me to visualize what is ahead, although I would keep being cautious because it is the first time that I am in that corridor and something unexpected may appear. But, without a doubt, I would feel better, I would walk quicker, without stopping that much and I would look around enjoying the environment while moving forward.

4. Scenario 4

Finally, imagine the same corridor with a brilliant light but considering that you have also been there before, you know where you are and the space is clear and diaphanous.

- *Question:* How would you move in that clear and familiar corridor, would you move the same way in the dark unknown corridor or in the clear but familiar corridor, would you be more confident or even totally confident?
- *Answer:* I would feel totally safe and confident because I would know where I am and what is ahead; as I had been in that space many times, I would know how long would take me to walk through it. I would probably feel very good, I would enjoy moving forward and looking around. If I stopped at some point, it would be for the pleasure of admiring the environment, not because I would be forced to or afraid to move forward.

This "*light and darkness*" exercise presents an analogy with project management and allows the concepts of predictive, adaptive and hybrid approaches to be clearly visualized.

What does “darkness” symbolize?

Darkness symbolizes having little information, training, personal or team experience, it represents the first times you develop something, etc.

You adapt as you move forward, you progress little by little in a safe way and, at the same time, the team might receive some training if needed, iterations are carried out to obtain more information to confirm that you are going in the right direction, to know more about the context, to reconfirm the hypothesis done at the beginning.

It usually works better to plan many phases with small scope that need to be tested progressively.

What does “light” symbolize?

Light symbolizes visibility, clarity, you have the right level of or even complete information, you are trained for it, you have experience and everything you need to develop that project.

You can see where you are and you know what will come next because either you have been in that place before or have done something many times or you have someone coaching you how to do it.

You consider that you are on a safe path and you progress confidently.

Guideline for a robust decision process

Once the exercise was completed, Maite gave her the decision keys:

- **Predictive:** If your feeling when analyzing the project context resembles being in a scenario with light, the predictive scenario is likely to be more suitable. The more light you have, the better for this scenario because there is much information available, requirements are clear and changes are expected to be few and small.
- **Adaptive:** If your feeling when analyzing the project resembles being in a scenario where darkness is in place, it is likely that the adaptive scenario is the appropriate one. There is a lack of information, high uncertainty in the requirements and changes are expected to be frequent.
- **Hybrid:** If your feeling when analyzing the project resembles having parts of light and dark, it is likely that the hybrid scenario is more appropriate (some activities might be managed with a predictive approach and others with an adaptive approach).

Conclusion

I was delighted and very grateful to Maite. Thanks to her wisdom, I had learned a simple eye-opening exercise to gain the necessary knowledge to make a solid decision on how to properly select the best approach to execute my project: predictive, adaptive or hybrid.

And always taking into account that a *one-for-all method doesn't apply in today's complex world: tailoring and adaptation are basic principles in modern project management.*
#People, #Ideas, #Sustainableprojects, #Results.

About the Author



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Human leadership, Global Sustainable Projects, Renewable energy, Story-teller, Keynote speaker, Lifetime learner, Risk management, Standardization

Manuel Ancizu is passionate about human leadership, sustainable projects and people's motivations. Enjoys working in international multicultural environments and wants to have a positive impact in society.

Manuel graduated in Economics from University of Navarra and obtained an MBA from IESE Business School (Spain); he has also studied in CEIBS (China) and University Anahuac del Sur (Mexico). He holds a number of professional certificates such as the PMP by Project Management Institute, Lead Auditor in ISO 9001:2015 by IRCA Association and has also received training in Management of Development Projects and Risk Management by Interamerican Development Bank (IDB).

Manuel has lived in Spain, France, UK and Mexico; he currently works in the wind energy sector leading the quality management of Offshore projects. Manuel has been involved in wind energy renewable projects developed in different parts of the globe with external customers, as well as in internal projects of cultural transformation, IT and global processes.

Thanks to his experience, he has delivered training sessions, lectures and keynotes to a different number of institutions.

Manuel is a qualified member of the Spanish Standardization Body (UNE) and has been involved in the development of Standards and Norms in Projects, Programs and Portfolios; he has also participated in the translation of different ISO 21500 to Spanish language.

Manuel loves smiling, storytelling, dreaming and making ideas come true in a sustainable manner. He lives in Pamplona, Spain and can be contacted at manuel@manuelancizu.com