Worthwhile projects need parenting

Part 1

Home and away

On average, travellers with children born in 2010 or later take more than three trips per year[1]. As parents know all too well, this requires meticulous planning. In some respects then, many of us will have tried our hands at project management!

Parents not only need to decide where to go, they need to plan the key aspects of the journey and ensure they are fully prepared to avoid disasters such as finding out the little one's passport has been left at home.

As the summer holiday season draws to a close, this concept has got us thinking about the similarities between good holiday planning and mobilising a programme at work. Our conclusion is that there is a strong parallel, as the key elements for success exist in both.

Holiday	The Overlap	Programme
End destination	Ensuring everyone knows where they are going.	**Goals and target state**
Stages of the journey	Agreeing the key stages of the journey to get to the end destination.	**Milestones**
Who is responsible?	Those responsible for ensuring everyone gets to the end destination (the adults!).	**Accountability/sponsorship**
Planning	Planning and booking tickets for each stage of the journey.	**Phasing & high-level project plans**
Packing	Ensuring everyone has what they need to get to the end destination with everything they need.	**Delivery**
Communication	Everyone is excited to be going on a journey.	**Internal Comms**
Reflection	Reflecting on successes and areas for improvement.	**Retrospective/ course correction**

However, despite the experience that many people have of organising holidays, it does not always translate into good programme/project management. In fact, McKinsey found that 70% of change projects fail[2].

In our experience, many failures happen at the point of **mobilisation**. We will now explore the common pitfalls we have observed at this critical stage and how to overcome these to successfully mobilise projects.

1. Mobilisation (Goals, Milestones & Accountability) → **2. Implementation** (Phasing, Delivery & Internal Comms) → **3. Post-implementation** (Restrospective)

Source: 2 McKinsey

The end destination: mind the gap!

Goals and target state

Without an end destination, there is no holiday, just a meandering journey. This is one of the most common failure points of projects – there is no clear articulation of the end destination (i.e. the **goals** of the project). This leads to misinterpretation and confusion by those you are looking to execute the project, creating a Value Gap.

Value

Clear end destination

Value gap

Unclear end destination

Time
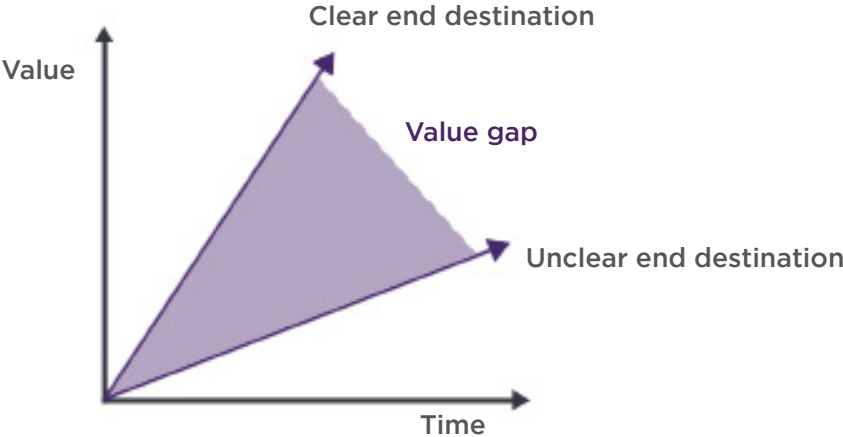
Common failures relating to **goals** that we come across a lot include:

Observations of common pitfalls	Best practice
The end destination is so high-level, or vague, that you can't put your finger on it and leaves the end destination open to interpretation.	Translate any strategic vision into **goals** which are SMART (Specific, Measurable, Achievable, Relevant, Time bound) to set a clear and more exact end destination.
The end state exists but is not communicated or even written down (the most easily avoidable of all the common failures).	Communicate your **goals** and REPEAT, REPEAT, REPEAT! Keep the language the same, have it in every document and keep reminding colleagues about why the change is happening (i.e. we are trying to get to the end destination). Everyone needs to be able to speak the same language and ideally, be intuitively aligned.
Teams obsess over the exactness of, or over-elaborate over, the goal to the extent that they lose the wider audience (the opposite of point number one).	Don't over complicate it. Make the **goal** specific enough as to be real for the audience, but not everyone needs the technical detail.

"If we could first know where we are, and whither we are tending, we could better judge what to do, and how to do it."

Abraham Lincoln

Stages of the journey

Milestones

Like any holiday, once you know where you want to go it becomes easier to decide how to get there, whether you are relying on planes, trains or automobiles. The same is true of projects. As soon as the **goal** is set, it is imperative to work backwards in logical steps to determine how to reach the end destination. This shows all stakeholders that a practical route map exists in order to arrive at the end destination. This does not mean **milestones** are set in stone and course correction over the project is to be expected.

Observations of common pitfalls	Best practice
Jumping from **goals** to detailed planning - a quantum leap makes it inevitable that you will miss something.	Break down the **goals**, working backwards to identify the key stages to achieving the **goal(s)**.
Too many **milestones** - can't see the wood for the trees.	**Milestones** should be memorable. Having 20 is hard for anyone to keep in their head. Try and keep the number under 7 (max).
Linking **milestones** to workstreams rather than **goals** - too many and too granular, participants lose the point… and the will to live!	**Milestones** are clearly linked to the **goals** and should be communicated (repeatedly) as such.
The absence of guiding principles explaining how you want to reach the **goal** - no cohesive design and the programme is dragged in different directions.	Create a set of design principles aligned to the **milestones** i.e. 'we will do X'; 'we will not do Y'.

"There is no one giant step that does it. It's a lot of little steps"

Peter A. Cohen

Who is responsible?

Accountability/sponsorship

Who is responsible? … usually the parents! Most willingly accept that responsibility, set the end destination and work out how to get there. Their ownership usually also extends to ensuring the holiday goes off without a hitch.

Projects need parenting - they need someone willing to get their arms around the change, accepting that not everything is under their direct control (on holiday we are reliant on airlines, hotels etc. upholding their end of the bargain). This is often the person who initiated the change. Common pitfalls regarding accountabilities that we have observed are:

Observations of common itfalls	Best practice
Ownership is unclear or spread across too many individuals.	Be very clear who is accountable for the overall delivery, avoiding fragmentation of overall ownership and assigning a principal Exec Sponsor.
Failing to align accountabilities across functions - leading to disinterested key stakeholders or separate 'agendas'.	Set corporate objectives which apply to all functions equally (e.g. risk have a sales target) to ensure all functions pull in the same direction and are incentivised to support your project.
No clear RACI showing dependencies on other functions or projects.	Develop a clear RACI and ensure senior management are aware of the dependencies (and positively influence this wherever possible).
Too much or too little governance.	Right-sized governance that includes all materially important stakeholders to ensure key decisions are taken in a timely fashion and dependencies are discussed and managed.

We hope you have found this blog covering key mobilisation activities insightful. In our next blog, we will delve into the common pitfalls and best practice for implementation.

If you have any questions, please do get in touch with us:

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