



Worthwhile projects need parenting

Part 2

Introduction

In part one of our series of whitepapers, we started to draw comparisons between good holiday planning and mobilising a significant change project at work. On the back of these musings our conclusion was that there is a strong parallel, as the key elements for success exist in both. This made us surmise that worthwhile projects need parenting!

Our first article looked at the **mobilisation** phase of a project and this, our second article, looks at **implementation**.



Like holidays much can, and does, go wrong when implementing change, and it is often said that implementing change needs a bit of luck to be successful. On that basis, complex change projects need a lot of luck as McKinsey research has demonstrated that over 70% of change projects fail!

The Roman philosopher Seneca is attributed with saying, “Luck is what happens when preparation meets opportunity” and although major change can be complex and difficult to achieve, success follows first class preparation. Jamie Dimon, CEO of JPMorgan Chase, opined, “I’d rather have a first-rate execution and second-rate strategy any time than a brilliant idea and mediocre management”.

The majority of complex change projects, even those that succeed, only do so after an intervention, or interventions, to address problems relating to cost, scope and time. As with holidays, pitfalls are many and varied, yet risk can and should be mitigated by full awareness of the challenges ahead and excellent preparation and planning to circumvent.

“Luck is what happens when preparation meets opportunity.”

Plentiful pitfalls for implementation

In our first article, we covered **goals**, **milestones** and **accountability**. Clearly these are not just for **mobilisation**, and failure to review and refresh through the whole of the project lifetime can mean successful conclusions are elusive. Other common failures we see all too regularly include:

Failing focus

The original intent of the strategy and organisational purpose is diluted by “Business As Usual”, or the purpose of the change is never fully understood or repeated sufficiently to embed it in the minds and activity of stakeholders at all levels.

Forgetting to communicate or reinforce the change

Communicating effectively with a diverse set of stakeholders, from the Executive team through to those executing the delivery, is fundamental to the success of projects. Each stakeholder group have their own needs, different ‘takeaways’ and potentially use their own language and approaches to communication. Excellent project communication is aware of, and caters to, each of these audiences by tailoring ‘comms’ to their needs. Typically, each audience will need reminding of:

- The key areas of focus.
- Why these are important to them, their customers, their organisation and perhaps other external audiences.
- The actions or steps you want them to take on reading the message.
- When you will next follow up with an update or to check that they have taken the desired action.

Points to remember:

- Each audience has its own specific requirements and although you may be tempted to use the same project comms to all stakeholders, don’t! If people need to try and process or interpret the communication, they may not bother or, if they do, they may take another meaning or action to that you intended.
- Different vehicles – email may be good for some people, a video or presentation better for others. Think it through, go with the optimal ‘channel’ and don’t be afraid to change if it isn’t working.
- Frequency – each stakeholder group require comms to a different drumbeat. Build that into your plans.
- Get feedback and adjust your approach to demonstrate you are prepared to listen, learn and respond.



Culture left to chance and bad behaviours

A positive ethos that supports successful change needs to be established. Additionally, damaging behaviours (those that don't contribute to delivery) must be called out and removed. If either or both of these factors are not embedded, then the change project will almost inevitably run into problems. Examples of damaging behaviours we have seen are:

- A relentless drive to hold functional areas responsible, creating a blame game that breaks down interdependence and collaboration.
- 'Group think' and a resultant lack of challenge and perspective.
- Project leadership is wedded to past decisions even when they are going wrong, leading to a 'double or bust' mentality.
- Leadership dysfunction drives extreme behaviour such as a reluctance to call out issues or more generally, keeping one's head down. Linked to this there is a need for leaders to be brave and hit 'pause' if things are drifting off course or moving away from strategy or set goals.
- Overly positive culture means risks are played down and RAG status played up.
- Budget is set before the scope or plan is finalised.
- No contingency is built in for price increases, slippage and additional resource requirements. This is particularly an issue for longer projects.
- Over-reliance on suppliers, consultants and contractors. As such, when they leave, organisational knowledge and project history leaves with them. They can be vitally important to accelerate change but need to work with your team to develop their capability and confidence so they can safely undertake a full handover and exit.
- Ignoring the end users' 'hearts and minds' – change is about culture and failing to prepare for culture change means 'preparing to fail'. This is marked when, after launch, a project works in relative isolation and disconnects from the people in the business that ultimately will be expected to run with the change delivered.

Knowledge and/or experience capability gaps

Most businesses are dependent on knowledge and expertise, and change initiatives are no exception. There are, however, some skillsets that are very specific to project and programme management:

The **right level of governance** is essential to monitor scope/budget/timeline without, in itself, becoming a cottage industry that is time consuming, adds little value for the time expended and distracts from delivery.

Planning is a key skill and an aligned plan for all workstreams and suppliers is critical. However, a solid and aligned plan is a snapshot in time and on its own is no guarantee that things will actually go to plan. As Lee Child's fictional character, Jack Reacher, likes to say, "plans go to hell as soon as the first shot is fired".

Change control, especially in agile changes, is a key skill and competency to understand the true impact of any changes and not just on the budget and delivery dates. By their nature, large scale change projects need to be realigned and any change can upset the calibration and cause multiple, often unintended, consequences.

Finally, and a personal favourite of the authors, are **RAID logs** that capture Risks, Assumptions, Issues and Dependencies. Effective risk and issue monitoring focuses on the changing risk spectrum, not on one area in isolation, and always looks at how the current and emerging risks are understood and mitigated across the project. That is the theory, but RAID logs rarely work like that in practice!

Slaves to a generic change methodology

Most organisations have made a choice between waterfall or agile as a preferred change methodology. The current fashion is for agile change, hence the plethora of new terminology like Burn Down, Planning Poker, Scrum (or even Scrum of Scrums). As with many fashions, function can sometimes be ignored, but unlike fashions from the past (remembering our sartorial mistakes from our younger years), agile makes a lot of sense, particularly if teams get behind the jargon and pick the right aspects for the situation at hand.

Similarly, aspects of waterfall methodology still meet the needs of many organisations and the purpose of their planned change e.g. mandatory regulatory requirements or IT system implementations. Though not exclusive to waterfall, setting the end goal and the key way-points is often clearer in this change methodology, helping senior management understand the direction of the programme and key deliverables therein.

As such, we advocate a 'best of breed' change methodology, tailored to the change driver and organisational capability.

Perfect preparation extends to calibrating your change methodology to the organisation's change culture, maturity and intent. Typical factors to consider are **purpose and vision**, **organisational capability** and **culture**. Further factors should also be considered and include the likes of:



1. Governance and decision making

Do Project Office need to maintain tight control with changes promptly flagged and fully understood (often to satisfy the Executive Committee and Regulators), or instead is a connected and real time view of cross organisation ownership and customer outcomes preferable?



2. Finance

Do Finance maintain tight control of the overall budget and project spend reporting, or instead, are budgets agreed up front and drawn down by a team for specific value delivery?



3. Operational scope

Are the project and workstreams fully accountable for the project before handing over to "Business As Usual", or instead are the operational areas fully engaged with and involved in the design and delivery of the change initiatives?



4. Reporting

Will progress (and delays) be monitored and communicated in line with a calendar (often to suit regular meetings), or in real-time?



5. Innovation and ideation

Is this undertaken up front, or required over the project lifetime?

The answers to these questions are probably not binary, therefore often a blended approach works best. Determining and nurturing a 'fit for your purpose' change methodology will avoid glitches, tensions and longer-term problems.

Conclusion

The enemy of successful change isn't a lack of money or resources. Instead, it is a failure to identify the barriers and pitfalls and to mitigate against them. The real enemy of change is a lack of ownership and objectivity... just the qualities that good parents offer!

Good project parenting entails knowing when more of the same is detrimental and a fresh approach might be better. Good parents know: when to intervene; when decisions need to be made (especially when they run against the grain); ask difficult questions that get to the heart of an issue; to call out bad behaviours or concerns; or seek additional expertise.

As in family holidays, good parents look ahead to anticipate and work around potential problems to keep their charges safe and to reach the desired destination in good spirits. Like elaborate holidays, very few successful long-term and complex projects arrive at their destination without needing some adjustment and refinement during the journey.

Good project parents know when to seek guidance and support when expertise or objectivity is required. Whilst we would never advocate wholly entrusting your change project to people that will not remain in your business post 'go live', there is value in unbiased, objective eyes at key points:

- Re-energising the change project at important moments whether to problem solve, de-risk or to work with key change people to upskill and bolster their confidence. This can be a massive accelerator and cut weeks and months from the project (and the ultimate resourcing cost).
- When your change project has come off the tracks, or you recognise it may do so due to difficulties being experienced, a short-sharp diagnostic that offers up solutions often makes a massive difference. The hardest part may be recognising you need that support or fresh pair of eyes.
- Periodic quality assurance reviews, at regular intervals, ensure the integrity and quality of a project and make the world of difference to achieving successful outcomes.

We hope you have found this blog covering key **implementation** pitfalls and suggested best practice insightful.

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



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