

BACK TO BASICS

Project management is just a matter of finding out what works and doing it over and over again. Or is it? **SALLY PERCY** investigates

“Repetition is the mother of learning, the father of action, which makes it the architect of accomplishment.” This observation by the late US motivational speaker Zig Ziglar applies as much to project management as it does to art, music, sport, writing and many other activities.

The theory is that, if you repeat the same task or sequence of tasks over and over again, eventually you will excel at them. “Look at professional athletes,” says Adrian Dooley, lead author of the Praxis Framework, a free, online project management resource, and a book (£49.95) published by APM. “In their training, they practise the basics over and over again. They make these basics instinctive. In a game situation, they then improvise around those basic skills.

“If they didn’t spend so much time doing the ‘boring stuff’ and getting it right, they would never have a platform from which to launch their creativity.”

For example, footballer David Beckham revealed in 2013 that his mastery of the free kick was the result of “tens of thousands, maybe hundreds of thousands” of practice free kicks in the local park when he was growing up. If only it were that simple...

REPETITION

In the world of project management, repetition does not relate to the process of landing a ball in a goal from a distance of 30 yards (although some project managers might argue that, actually, metaphorically it does). Instead, it relates to the process of getting the basics right – repeatedly.

So far, so good. The challenge, however, is defining exactly what those basics are, and here the opinions of the experts differ. “If you ask 100 people this question, you’ll get 101 different outcomes,” jokes Alan Macklin, director, government acquisition and support programmes, at CH2M.

He cites the seven perspectives outlined in the Office of Government Commerce’s Portfolio, Programme and Project Management Maturity Model as being a good starting point for anyone trying to define the basics of project management. These perspectives are: organisational governance, management control, benefits management, financial management, stakeholder engagement, risk management and resource management.

His caveat is that these basics need to be interpreted in the relevant technical context of the project – for example, education, engineering or health. He says: “I would argue that there are eight basic principles of project management: the seven perspectives, and then principles based on the technical field in which you’re working.”

Someone else who keeps a comprehensive list of the basic principles of project management is Mike Clayton, a project management trainer and author, and founder of OnlinePMCourses.com.

“Projects involve doing new things, usually in an environment where there is flux, pressure to get things done and constraint on resources,” Clayton says. “Therefore, the nature of a project is risk, and the basics are the things that respond to that.”

He identifies the basics as good planning and stakeholder engagement, as well as the ability to actively manage and control risk and lead a team of people.

In addition, projects usually have a deadline and a budget. “When you do a project, you are spending somebody’s money,” observes Clayton.

“Therefore, your ability to estimate costs from which to build a robust business case, and your ability to manage those costs, are very important.”

Other experts prefer a very simple definition of the basics: emphasising the human element of project management. ▶

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APM'S CONDITIONS FOR PROJECT SUCCESS

In 2015, APM published *Conditions for Project Success*, a piece of independent research that sought to identify the core factors leading to the successful delivery of projects, programmes and portfolios. It found that five factors have the strongest and most consistent relationship with the traditional measures of project success: time, cost and quality. These are:

1 PLANNING AND REVIEW

Pre-project planning should be thorough and considered, with monitoring and review throughout the project.

2 GOALS AND OBJECTIVES

The overall goal of the project should be clearly specified and recognised by all stakeholders involved in the project.

3 EFFECTIVE GOVERNANCE

The project needs to have clear reporting lines and regular communication between all parties.

4 COMPETENT PROJECT TEAMS

The project professionals leading, or forming a core team, need to be fully competent to carry out their duties.

5 COMMITMENT TO SUCCESS

All parties involved in the project must be, and remain, committed to the project's success.

For example, Dooley sees the basic principle as “working with others to define and achieve beneficial outcomes”, while Carole Osterweil, director at OMQ Consulting, argues that project management is a “people endeavour”. She says: “Over the years, we’ve made huge advances in methods and processes. With that has come a tendency to dehumanise projects. The people dimension has got lost – we need to bring it back into focus. You can’t achieve without people.”

SAME CHALLENGE, DIFFERENT PROJECT

People have been tackling projects since time immemorial. The evidence of this can be seen in ancient wonders such as the Great Wall of China, the pyramids and Stonehenge. It seems that, while experts may differ in their opinions of what constitutes the basics of project management, they tend to hold the view that, whatever their opinions are, the basics themselves have not changed over time.

“I don’t think they’ve changed since the pharaohs hired a project manager to stick a pyramid in the middle of the desert,” says Clayton. “I’m sure that the pharaohs would have said: ‘Can you assure me that this will be done before I’m dead? Can you assure me that this won’t bankrupt my treasury? Can you assure me that my people will be mightily impressed by what you’ve put up?’ Those are just schedule management, budget management and stakeholder management. I doubt that the pharaohs’ project managers would have drawn a Gantt chart in the sand, but I bet they would have drawn something similar.”

He does point out, however, that there has been a growth in multi-site and multinational projects: “Projects are spread all over the globe. Teams have to collaborate with other teams that are not in the same office, not in the same time zone and not talking the same language.” Technology has therefore become a way of implementing the basics and allowing long-distance collaboration to take place so that projects can run 24 hours a day.

Dooley says that projects are operating in an increasingly complex society, thanks to advances in technology. “Life is getting more complex and projects reflect life,” he says. “The interconnected world is ready to jump on you the minute you make a mistake. Managers are often very nervous of making a decision in case they get it wrong.”

THE PROJECT MANAGER’S TOOLKIT

So what do project managers need in their toolkits to help them get the basics right? Clayton advises that every project should have a risk register, a project-initiation document, a business case and a plan. He cautions against being overly reliant on Gantt charts, however, saying that, while these popular project management tools suit big projects, they are not necessarily right for smaller projects, since they can overcomplicate matters.

Dooley homes in on the key behaviours of bravery, confidence, honesty and realism. “Tools and techniques, such as those set out in bodies of knowledge and methodologies, are important for laying the foundations of good project management, but it’s the behaviour of project managers and those around them that build on those foundations,” he explains.

“Project managers need to have sharp people skills,” comments Osterweil. “They need to understand why people behave the way that they do.” She argues that technology will develop in a way that enables project managers to more effectively read and predict social dynamics: “Collaborative

EXPERTS’ TOP TIPS FOR GETTING THE BASICS RIGHT

MIKE CLAYTON:

- Value your stakeholders and engage with them positively. Don’t take their resistance in a negative way. It’s a sign that they understand the issues and care about them.
- Make sure you are crystal clear about what your client or organisation expects from the project in terms of goals, costs and time. Make sure the baseline costs and scope are signed off.
- Things will inevitably go wrong, so you need to be constantly thinking about risk.

ADRIAN DOOLEY:

- Relax! Stop letting yourself be pressurised by unrealistic expectations (often your own), the constant stream of information about the latest big thing in project management or the ‘top 10 things you must do to succeed’. Take time to reflect on the common-sense elements of managing projects that never change.
- Be honest. If you don’t think an objective can be achieved, say so. If you need help, ask. If people are causing problems

for your project, find out what it is that drives them.

- Be focused. There will be conflict and there will be problems. You can’t always please everybody. Sometimes, you have to act on instinct to do what you believe to be right.

ALAN MACKLIN:

- Pick the trusted framework that you will use and stick to it.
- Project management is about people and relationships between people. It’s also about getting other people to pull their weight.

CAROLE OSTERWEIL:

- You can’t separate project delivery from project leadership. The way we behave – what we say, think and do on a daily basis – will dictate what is delivered.
- Be real; be grounded. Think about your own behaviour as well as the behaviour of other people.
- Invest in developing self-awareness. Learn to distinguish what is happening today from what happened in the past.

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WHEN IT GOES AWRY

According to research by professional services firm PwC, a tiny 2.5 per cent of companies successfully complete 100 per cent of their projects. So, if project management is really as simple as determining the basics and doing them over and over again, why do so many projects fall down?

Dooley blames project managers who lose sight of the big picture and spend so much time answering the questions ‘who?’, ‘what?’, ‘how?’ and ‘when?’ that they forget to step back now and again to reflect on the ‘why?’

“Every now and then, we need to have a sanity check on why we’re actually doing something,” he explains. Dooley has a good friend who once described a project problem as follows: “I was digging this hole so deep, I couldn’t see over the top to check if I was digging it in the right place.”

Meanwhile, Osterweil highlights the risk of organisations not recognising project management as a people endeavour. This mindset then invariably filters down to individual project



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managers. “Of course, methods and tools are important, but we have to use them in a way that demonstrates we believe that people are central to achieving the project outcomes and benefits,” she says.

Clayton emphasises the role of sponsorship and governance. “A lot of organisations are very poor at appointing sponsors who take their roles seriously, and they do little to prepare them for project sponsorship,” he says. “Poor sponsorship leads to weak governance.”

Macklin believes that success in project management largely depends on how you define success, and argues that it should be specified upfront. “Was Heathrow Terminal 5 a success? Public perception recalls the fiasco of its opening, but if you remember back to its construction, the project to build the terminal was, and still is, recognised as a benchmark of modern, progressive innovation that was remarkably successful.”

STARTING OVER

But to return to where we started, can we assume that, if a project manager has just completed one successful project, all he or she needs to do to ensure triumph on the next one is to repeat everything exactly?

The answer to that is yes – and no.

“Yes, if people are at the centre,” comments Osterweil, “but also no. Getting the basics right and repeating them again and again could imply that we’re not coming to it fresh each time. We need to approach every project, every situation and every group of people within the project with a fresh perspective and ask: ‘What is different this time?’”

She continues: “We’re learning from neuroscience that humans are very good at unconsciously bringing echoes from past situations and relationships into the present. We have to be careful not to do that. For example, if I’m at a client meeting, it’s quite possible that the tone of the client’s voice momentarily transports me back to a difficult meeting with a previous client. Without realising it, I may respond as if I were in the other meeting.”

“Success is linked to repeating the basics and repeating them well,” remarks Macklin, “but projects are about people and every project is different. So if you do things in precisely the same way next time, you will not be guaranteed the same result.” ■

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