

Balancing Flexibility and Structure in Project Planning

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The art of planning is undoubtedly one of the most critical elements for any organisations. Be it project, programme or portfolio management, several decisions rest upon effective planning, and while there seems to be a shared sentiment for organisations to embrace a more customer centric and flexible approaches to accommodate changes, the reality is that most are still formulating strategies that are tightly coupled with inflexible plans. In my experience, the commonly cited reason for this is “budget allocation”.

However, is budgeting simply serving as a convenient way to preserve the status quo?

The Importance of Structure

Recognising the critical need for organisations to swiftly adapt to changes in the environment does not diminish the value and importance of structured planning.

Structured planning provides a sense of stability, offering individuals a clear understanding of their roles within the organisation and what is expected from them. It provides them with a roadmap, detailing a clear destination and the steps required to achieve the end goal. This not only instils awareness of subsequent steps but also reduces ambiguity and uncertainty. Furthermore, through structured planning, clear Key Performance Indicators (KPIs) can be set at both an organisational and individual levels, ensuring that progress towards achieving specific objectives is monitored.

Finally, structure planning enhances resource utilisation, strengthens expectations management, facilitates risk management, and brings order to complexity.

The Need for Flexibility

Despite the benefits of structured planning, the reality is that organisations don't exist in isolation. The constant changes in market dynamics, customer behaviour, and competitive landscape to mention a few, force organisations to respond and adapt for survival. Furthermore, whether it's an unexpected lack of resources or scope creeps, the reality is that many unforeseen challenges crop up during project execution.

Therefore, the dynamic nature of projects, influenced by external market shifts, stakeholder demands, or unforeseen obstacles, necessitates an adaptive mindset, one that embraces flexibility in planning.

Strategies for Flexibility within Structures

Having said this, achieving the right balance between flexibility and structure is a challenging endeavour. While there is no magical solution for project managers to strike this balance, I often recommend concentrating on three overarching strategic themes.

Theme 1: Iterative Planning

Avoid building a comprehensive plan at project planning phase – instead, focus only on high-level milestones and develop the detailed plan over time through cycles. Commonly associated with agile methodologies, this approach allows for continuous adjustments based on evolving circumstances including progress, constraints, and external changes.

The cadence, in terms of cycle planning, duration, and meetings/ceremonies, creates a certain level of structure within the planning process.

Theme 2: Scalable Planning

As discussed in the previous theme, establishing high-level milestones is crucial before embarking on a project. However, it is equally important not to restrict yourself to the initial scope. Instead, focus on identifying must-have and nice-to-have features, structuring components in a way that can scale independently. Ultimately, build a plan that can expand or contract depending on the changing needs of the project.

This approach allows the plan to adapt to unforeseen circumstance within a stable and overarching structure.

Theme 3: Dynamic Task Assignment

Departing from the conventional method of task assignment to individuals by embracing a team-focused perspective on delivery is crucial not only for reducing dependencies but also for aiding organisations in building self-sustainable, high-performing teams.

During planning, allocate tasks to the team that will ultimately be responsible for their delivery, ensuring that you: (1) identify the skillsets required for the team to accomplish these tasks, (2) determine any skill gaps, (3) upskill and reskill as necessary, (4) instil a sense of collaboration and shared responsibility, and (5) empower the team to successfully deliver the tasks.

This planning technique offers a well-structured approach to task assignment while offering flexibility at executional level.

Supporting Factors

The overarching strategic themes act as a foundation for crafting a balanced, flexible, and structured plan. Nevertheless, accompanying these themes are strategic components that, if not carefully designed, could hinder the realisation of these plans.

One of these core components is robust **prioritisation frameworks**. These should systematically categorise tasks based on their significance, while constantly maintaining the concept of the strategic themes by recognising that

- Planning for all prioritised tasks won't happen on day one but approached iteratively, and
- The formulation of a well-defined plan in the initial stages of the project is not guaranteed despite the task's substantial priority.

These considerations necessitate a prioritisation framework that remains open to multiple re-runs, adjustments, and iterations as the project unfolds.

Another integral component involves adopting a **flexible resource allocation** mechanism across the organisation, one that allows the scaling up or down of resources based on the changing needs of the project, received feedback, and required skillsets. This is equally applicable to **project governance**, which must reflect the current iteration and scope rather than adhering to a fixed, rigid governance throughout the entire duration of the project.

Finally, is a **flexible budgeting technique**. While a foundational level of budget planning is essential, the budgeting process should align with the three strategic themes, thus offering

flexibility depending on the outcome of the current planning iteration, forecasts of future iterations, changes in project scale or scope, and adaptability based on evolving resource allocations.

Striking the right balance between flexibility and structure in planning is a complex challenge. In large corporate organisations, structured planning is often the norm, providing a stable framework for managing complex projects and ensuring a streamlined execution process. On the contrary, high-tech organisations usually favour a more flexible planning approach that adapts swiftly to evolving circumstances.

Each approach comes with its distinct advantages and disadvantages. The key lies in finding an approach that combines the strengths of both type of planning. Recognising that one size does not fit all, organisations must assess their specific needs, industry dynamics, and project requirements.

The strategic use of iterative planning, scalable planning, and dynamic task assignment can act as invaluable tools for achieving this delicate equilibrium. This is further strengthened by continuous feedback loops and a customer centric mindset.

However, success is only possible when supported, and driven by senior management.

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About Me



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With over 15 years of expertise, I am a highly motivated and results-driven transformation strategy expert, with a track record of defining, executing, and overseeing large-scale strategic and transformational programs, bringing changes in mindsets, innovative practices, and tools to tackle complex challenges.

Throughout my career, I've spearheaded the development and management of Strategy, Transformation, Professional Services, Project Management, and Digital offices, collaborating with Boards, C-Level Executives, and international clients. This journey involves coaching and training in Project Management and Agile methodologies for individuals with diverse skill sets.

Currently, I serve as the Vice-Chairman of the PMI Malta Steering Committee, actively contributing to establishing the first PMI Chapter in Malta.

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