



White Paper 2012-23

The Urgency of Project Startup: How to Ensure Success of your Project by Creating the Space to Lead

The startup phase of project execution is critical for the success of the project. Not just because it is the moment where the project team has the most influence on the outcome and where small investments will yield the best returns. It is also because a sound setup will later give space to the team to concentrate on the inevitable issues arising during project execution and lead the project through them – which is invaluable.

The startup phase of project execution is a hectic moment. Many things need to be achieved in a short time, while the project team is being brought together and learns how to work as a group.

Yet if there is a critical moment in the life of a project, it is project startup – because it is the quality of the project setup that will decide the capability of the project team to respond to the unexpected later.

Project startup, a busy time

The following activities need to be completed at project startup in a short time:

- Defining detailed project objectives and KPI's to be achieved,
- Mobilizing the team, setting up the office,
- Defining the detailed project execution plan and all relevant related documents covering HSE, quality, engineering, construction etc,
- Defining the execution baseline in terms of schedule and cost,
- Establishing a stakeholder mapping, action plan and appropriate communication channels,
- Setting up the appropriate systems and processes to execute the project.

It is very conventional to mention that project startup is the phase where the maximum impact can be created with the least resource and cost. As the project progresses it will become more and more difficult to influence its outcome, as the level of commitment will rise and drive the actual final result of the project. Of course, project execution planning is made significantly easier by a good earlier preparation at tendering and planning stage even before the decision to proceed.

Project startup needs to be addressed with the appropriate urgency. It is important to achieve as quickly as possible a stable situation where all the important foundations of project execution are effectively in place.

The aim of project startup is not just to plan the project. It is to create robustness to change.

Commonly, success of the startup phase is measured by the “quality” of the planning of project execution; which in turn is often measured by its level of detail.

Our experience is that it is not the right criterion. Rather than developing excessive detail, it is much more important to identify and check the robustness of the fundamental assumptions behind the execution plan. Moreover, those assumptions and other parameters in the project environment can be expected to change during the project execution. Hence, This leads to take such steps that have been described in other White Papers: protecting the project from unexpected variations in non-critical activities by adding buffers, and more generally, introducing safety margins with regard to a too conventional ‘as late as possible’ scheduling approach. It also leads to identify those early deliverables that need to be delivered on time, early in the project, because they drive a lot of the subsequent activities.

Investing in systems is about creating time to respond to the unexpected

One very important aspect of project startup is to setup the appropriate systems and processes that will allow to have an accurate view of the project situation and current course at all times. The type of systems and their technology will vary greatly depending on the size of the project. For large, complex projects, computerized systems and databases are unavoidable; and these systems need to be made available on all the project office and construction sites.

The most important intent of these systems and processes is often overlooked. In addition to implementing systems that can produce this view of the project current situation, these systems need to be designed to free the project team leaders as much as possible from running them so that they can concentrate on acting on the course of the project.

This is a very important additional requirement because often minimum systems are setup that will still require a very significant involvement of key project personnel to run them.

Instead of focusing on the level of detail of the execution plan, it is more effective to concentrate on building an execution plan that is as resilient as possible to changes and natural variation.

Let's use the image of a sailing ship race. At any moment it is important to know where the ship is and where it goes. Yet if the skipper spends his time the nose down in calculations and measurements instead of having the nose up to look around and anticipate changes in wind and weather, he will certainly not be effective. The skipper needs to rely on a system that allows him to have as much time as possible to monitor the external conditions and anticipate as much as possible the course of the ship.

The goal at the end of project startup should thus be to have a comprehensive set of systems that give an accurate view of the project situation and also run by themselves with minimum supervision. This will allow the project leadership to concentrate on driving the project in the midst of the inevitable external changes that occur in all human endeavors.

One often hears that the goal in project controls is to work like mad at the beginning of the project to setup the right systems and processes and rest the remainder of the project. It is not true; the aim is not to have a good time and rest: it is to be available for the inevitable events and changes. It is to be available to go at the helm and lead.

Feedback from the field: the 2 errors that lead to failure

Throughout our extensive consulting experience in projects, we have found that most project teams fail significantly short of being successful in the project startup phase. And it is no surprise when later the overall project falls short of expectations!

The two main syndromes we observe are:

- No urgency
- Setup of insufficient systems & processes

Amazingly, we observe a very low sense of urgency in many projects during the startup phase. This is often the case in organizations with low experience or maturity in project management. As the final project delivery seems to be far away, urgency is minimal. This is a huge mistake: urgency needs to be there from day 1, because the unexpected will happen; what can be done now should be done and not postponed, and the team should

not rest until the project platform has been setup correctly.

Project startup is the most important and most urgent phase of the project. It is what will allow you to lead. Don't spoil this unique opportunity

We also observe a very widespread thriftiness when it comes to setting up systems and processes. It is quite amazing because the amounts concerned are always very low compared to the project value, and because they are an investment with such

a huge return in terms of later project performance (refer to our White Paper [2012-19](#), "*The Economic Justification of Proper IT tools to Support a Large, Complex Project*". The excuses that are generally brought forward are:

- Systems are a corporate responsibility, let's wait for corporate guidance (surprise: corporate does not feel any urgency at all and their timelines are completely different!),
- It is not my job to bother about systems and processes for all these issues (variant of it's a corporate responsibility)
- This is very costly (the point is here – it is not a cost it is an investment with one of the highest returns you could dream of).

Let's be clear: as a project leader, your responsibility is the success of the project by all means. And even if you spend a bit more to have an awesome system that allows to free your time, what's the issue?

Conclusion

Don't fall into the trap: project startup is a critical moment. As a project leader, you need to setup a project configuration as quickly as possible that will free you from the mundane and repetitive tasks and allow you to steer your project through the unexpected.

To achieve that, you need to impart a feeling of urgency from day 1 of the project, and not hesitate to invest in the infrastructure you need to spare your time later.

Not only will it make you more effective, but it will also accelerate the team formation while increasing the interest of each position, because people will be freed to lead more, and manage less.

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