

## Reflection 18. Avoid Death by Project!

Over my 30 years in financial services, I've encountered 'death by project' in multiple institutions. I call death by project, the paralysis that occurs when an institution has too many competing projects striving for attention, alongside a history of a lack of project execution and completion.

The project approach has the best of intentions: to ensure that competing priorities are managed, to ensure that projects have access to scarce human resources, and to ensure that the process of project execution is tracked. Indeed, project management is fundamental to the success of any organisation.

IT specialists will talk about the nature of project management, whether the approach should be waterfall (sequential) or agile. Project management specialists will talk of the critical path. All very important. And still, I encounter death by project.

A fundamental challenge is that as the number and range of projects increases, I see the level of ownership of the projects, overall decrease. I see pet projects, or those started by former staff which seem to matter to few outside the promoters. As a consultant I know, that where there is high level of institutional ownership of the consulting assignment, the assignment itself usually flows well and the assignment is completed rapidly and to the satisfaction of my client. Conversely, where there is limited ownership projects stall.

A second challenge particularly in some innovation projects I've seen, is 'scope creep'. One of the best products I've worked on – never to be launched, was a digital finance product significantly in advance in time and nature even than the launch product of M-Pesa. It suffered scope creep.

So, where there is paralysis by project - I've seen several solutions, though none without cost.

- a) *Understand and scope properly*: Projects sometimes fail because the problem or need itself wasn't understood properly. Make sure of the foundations, scope properly, research and test. It will save time later in redevelopment.
- b) *Increase capacity in project management*: In some cases, institutions need to increase their own capacity in project management. Training staff, including the management team in project management and equipping them with project management software.
- c) *Outsource project management*: Another option is to employ a professional project manager on a contract basis, who has no other job in the institution. This can work where there are many projects.
- d) *Increase focus*: Another challenge I've come across is where the projects themselves are not of equal importance, and the real issue is to focus on a smaller number of achievable projects.
- e) *Improve alignment to increase ownership*: Strategic alignment is important, it's a strategic business planning approach where the institution analyses critical success factors, and almost all institutional effort is focused on meeting these critical success factors.

- f) *Build capacity and go extreme*: Building institutional capacity in core skills can provide internal staff to participate on projects. Then internalise the capacity.
- g) *Outsource the project*: Some projects, or activities within projects can be outsourced. This carries a cost, but so do all the options above.
- h) *Partnerships*: Work in partnership where partners have key capacities that you do not.
- i) *Digital designer and digital architect*: Avoid scope creep by separating the designer and architect roles. The designer designs, the architect builds to the design. This point is made by one of the digital gurus Chris Skinner.

First Principles Consulting can help you in making decisions to avoid project paralysis. It can help you to build capacity, it can help you to examine and rethink your project management approaches.

*If this reflection speaks to you... speak to me so that we can inspire change, together.*

David Cracknell

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