

Roel Wessels

THE COMPLETE PROJECT MANAGER

THE ESSENCE AND APPLICATION
OF PROJECT MANAGEMENT
AND AGILE LEADERSHIP



THE COMPLETE PROJECT MANAGER

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Colophon

Title:	The complete project manager
Subtitle:	The essence and application of project management and Agile leadership
Author:	Roel Wessels
English translation:	Luc Munnekom (WordVision)
Reviewers:	Ben Bolland (BEVON Gilde) Alexander Celie (Traction10) Hans Fredriksz (IPMA-NL, Haax) Bas Könemann (You Improve) Ben van de Laar (Randstad Groep IT) Ruud Merks (ASML) Henny Portman (Hedeman Consulting) Dieter van der Put (DAF Trucks) Ron Schipper (Van Aetsveld) John Verstrepen (former director of IPMA-NL)
Text editor:	Dutch edition: Nienke van Oeveren (Boekredactie) English translation: Steve Newton
Publisher:	Van Haren Publishing, 's-Hertogenbosch, www.vanharen.net
ISBN Hard copy:	978 94 018 0400 4
ISBN eBook pdf:	978 94 018 0401 1
ISBN eBook EPUB:	978 94 018 0402 8
Editions:	Dutch edition: First edition, first impression, August 2016 English translation: First edition, first impression, July 2019
Layout and DTP:	Coco Bookmedia, Amersfoort – NL
Copyright:	© Van Haren Publishing, 2016, 2019

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Preface

The only thing I know is that I know nothing.

Socrates

What is a complete project manager? I cannot answer that question; only you can.

This book covers the enormous playing field of the project manager. The emphasis is on the **how** of project management and how adopting a proactive attitude allows you to stay in control, even during **difficult situations**. The book covers several themes that are made as explicit and clear as possible with the help of examples and anecdotes. These do not illustrate the only correct method; instead, they are intended to touch and inspire you. I am not for or against anything. Rather, I want you to think and make your own choices!

Even though I am interested in anything to do with project management and leadership, I have a background in product development and manufacturing. That is a world of product and service development, multidisciplinary teams, a strong emphasis on lead times, quality and costs, a focus on innovation, and collaboration with a global network of suppliers and clients. Nevertheless, this book was written first and foremost for **general project managers**. I received support from a group of reviewers from various fields.

Complete project managers are best characterized by the fact that they do not know everything, yet they are curious and eager to develop themselves further. The reading guide on the next page can help with that. The chapters of this book form a coherent story, yet they can also be read on their own. You can even jump straight to the section on project execution in chapter 10, because that chapter begins with a summary of the preceding chapters.

Choose your theme, dare to go your own way and become an even more complete project manager!

Reading guide	&-&-paradox	The TomTom	V-model	Factor 10	Plan: the breakdown	Plan: detailed plan	Project motivator	Heartbeat	The blind check	Final Countdown
	Ch1	Ch2	Ch3	Ch4	Ch5	Ch6	Ch7	Ch8	Ch9	Ch10
The complete project manager										
For novice project managers who want to gain an overview of the field of project management	<i>Use the book as a textbook</i>									
For experienced project managers who want to become even more complete	<i>Choose your subjects and learn how to become even more effective</i>									
For people who want to learn how to combine the hard and soft aspects of project management	<i>Experience how methods and behavior lead to 1+1=3</i>									
For practicing project managers who want to know more about the <i>how</i> and day-to-day application										
For people who want to learn how to stay in control at all times, even when dealing with less-than-perfect clients and environments										
For people who want to learn to go their own way and become less reliant on methods										
For people who want to become more effective and flexible										
For people who want to learn how to structure and gain an overview of complex projects										
For project managers working in the field of product development who want to learn how to integrate hardware and software development										
For project managers in other fields who want to learn more about the methods used in product development										
For people who want to get an overview of project management and leadership literature by reading a novel-like text	<i>Become inspired and experience the story as if you were attending a seminar</i>									
For people who want to gain a quick understanding of what it means to be a complete project manager	<i>Flip through the book and only read the 'tiles' on the pages</i>									

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Introduction

The title of this book, *The complete project manager*, might appear a bit pretentious. Nevertheless, it comes straight from my heart. This book is for you. An enormous amount has been written about project management, yet most texts do not focus on the experiences and perception of the project manager: you.

There are countless books that tell you exactly *what* to do to successfully execute projects. They cover the ins and outs of stakeholder analysis, risk management, the importance of plan-do-check-act and what is expected of you when managing your team. However, most people are still left to find out for themselves *how* to apply these techniques in practice, how to be successful *even* in less-than-perfect conditions, how to integrate the methods in their *own* work processes and how to make sure they *actually* do so.

In this book I cover everything I have learned in the past two decades about project management and leadership in as comprehensive and practical a manner as possible. I looked for the essence, because understanding that will help you apply and integrate the methods in your own behavior. In other words, this book can teach you how to abandon your reactive behavior and become proactive and influential instead and, in particular, how to make project management fun (again) for yourself, your team and your environment.

The project manager of the 21st century

Over the past decades a lot has changed in the world of project management. The environment has become more dynamic and the expectations made of project managers have grown. They are expected to deliver results regardless of the circumstances, offer commitment despite major uncertainties, manage highly educated knowledge workers while also coaching them to act more autonomously, deal with stakeholders with different interests and encourage creative breakthroughs without taking excessive risks. In other words: project management can sometimes be a balancing act of Herculean proportions!

Managing all of this requires expertise and the ability to stay in control in any situation. It is like sailing a boat during a storm: there is no time to think and try different approaches to see what works best. You have to manage your project with conviction and decisiveness, and be optimally effective and efficient. How can you do all that?

On top of that, you will probably have noticed that the problems you struggle with and the obstacles that seem insurmountable to you are sometimes dealt with by others without them breaking a sweat. The reverse is also true. It would appear that *how* you manage a project is an all-important factor: applying the right methods in the right situations and demonstrating the right behavior. How can you learn to do that? Where can you find examples to follow? There are countless inspirational management and motivation techniques, but what is the best way to combine them all?

Can you still see the wood for the trees or are you caught up in the theory and do you keep promising yourself over and over again *that you will do better next time?*

Physicist and musician

To answer the aforementioned questions, I went in search of the essence of successful project management. I was able to make use of my years of experience as a project manager, program manager and director of product development, as well as my experience as both a physicist and a musician. The physicist in me is reflected in the focus on structuring projects, the urge to uncover the similarities between methods and the desire to simplify complicated matters. In other words, managing complexity. The musician is felt when I talk about combining constant high-level performance with letting go to facilitate the creative process, the belief that project managers should always take the initiative and therefore need to bring out the performer in themselves, and the emphasis on the importance of rhythm in projects and change processes.

I am passionate about bringing people, methods and philosophies together. The whole is greater than the sum of its parts. As you will see, the aim of this book is not to refute other methods and promise the umpteenth new path to success. Instead, I want to illustrate how methods such as PRINCE2, Agile, DSDM Atern, *PMBOK Guide*, PRINCE2 Agile, the ICB competence framework by IPMA and a multitude of leadership techniques can be effectively deployed together. True experts are not limited by their tools; instead, the tools enrich them. I love to combine modern Agile techniques with more traditional methods. After all, this combination of dynamics is quite common in the real world as well. That is why I prefer to talk about Agile *leadership*: the Agile attitude is more important than the Agile processes.

Over the past seven years, in addition to applying the methods myself, I have taught the contents of this book to more than six hundred professionals during four-day master classes. These people came from a variety of backgrounds: the high-tech sector, the public sector, the medical world, education, construction, IT and other fields. In short, this book was written for anyone who wants to hone their project management skills.

What will this book bring you?

This book contains a complete overview of how to apply project management and Agile leadership to product, service and organizational development. It is accessible for someone who wants to gain an initial understanding of the ins and outs of project management, yet its primary audience consists of advanced project leaders who are eager to take their knowledge and skills to the next level. An in-depth understanding of project management is not required, because this book covers all you need to know. Nevertheless, your existing knowledge and experience will definitely come in handy as you work through it. The book offers plenty of substantive depth, but its focus is on the interaction between the theory and your own behavior and methods. After all, it is all about the *how* and about actually *doing it*, even under less-than-perfect conditions. You will, therefore, also learn how to successfully implement the knowledge found in this book in your day-to-day work processes.

The book consists of three parts. Part 1 (chapters 1 to 4) describes how to set up and manage a project. The focus is on the basic principles, the essence of taking control, creating structure and using Agile behavior. Part 2 (chapters 5 and 6) explains how to draw up a plan and schedule in small steps, which results in improved completeness, coordination and support. Finally, part 3 (chapters 7 to 10) covers how to manage the project execution: how to realize the path to the final goal with a strict PDCA rhythm, how to evaluate the quality of interim results and how to keep your team and environment motivated.

I have sought to make this book as practical as possible by combining theory with practical application and anecdotes. Let this be a source of inspiration to you. It is important to combine the essence of what you learn with your own style and personality. Do things your way, otherwise, your chances of success will be slim and, more importantly, *people will not believe you!*

I hope you enjoy reading this book and putting what you learn into practice.

Project management is a lot of fun!

Roel Wessels

1 The &-&-paradox¹

- How the growing demand for and-and-and turns a project manager's life on its head.
- Why focusing on control and focusing on results and processes are two different things.
- The importance of being able to deal with uncertainty.
- Explaining what Agile is and how it ties into traditional methods.
- The central theme of this book: from reactive to proactive to influencing.

The first time I went skiing I was nearly thirty. I was the only novice in our group of friends, which meant that I was taught the basic principles together with the other rookies, while the rest of my buddies were still eating breakfast. The class was scheduled in the morning and I did not leave the beginner's slope at all that first day. However, I caved to peer pressure on the second day and joined my friends on their run in the afternoon. They had promised to keep my lack of experience in mind.

It all went quite well at first and although I felt a bit awkward about always being the last one to come down, my positive attitude showed me that the others seemed to appreciate the little breaks I afforded them, because it gave them a chance to enjoy a smoke. However, after an hour, the group paused and some people started grumbling a bit. We had missed a turn and ended up at an expert slope. In my naivety, I looked for a way back. There wasn't one; the only way forward was down...

My friends told me that, although the slope was steep, the snow was excellent and that I could get down the steepest sections by sliding sideways. After some hesitation, I started my descent and I did quite well, despite sweating like a pig the entire time. I slowly grew more confident and after I got past the steepest section, I actually started to feel a bit elated.

Before I knew it, I had reached the bottom. I often think back on the things I do and reflect that it wasn't that hard after all. Looking up from below, however, a slope looks even steeper than it actually is. I felt like a king after coming down that mountain unscathed – until a far more experienced skier came racing down as if it were nothing. It made me realize that, despite everything, *I still had plenty left to learn.*

I often begin my lectures with this anecdote, before asking the audience the following question: “Who among you has received feedback from a professional during or after a difficult project about how to improve the project execution?” More often than not, people

¹ This chapter ties into the following competences from IPMA's ICB4: Strategy, Governance, structures and processes, Resourcefulness, Project design, Change and transformation.

do not raise their hand. Instead, most people are used to hearing something along the lines of “Projects are always difficult here, better get used to it” or “Our environment is so complex that standard project management methods are no use.”



Do you receive feedback during or after a project about how to improve things?

Project managers and their environment have apparently accepted that projects do not go the way they want. They lack experts in the organization to analyze the problem and show them how to improve the situation. Worse, they may not even realize that there is room for improvement; they fail to realize that experienced skiers actually enjoy going down the expert slope and that difficult projects, e.g. those with a lot of uncertain factors or difficult stakeholders, can actually be undertaken successfully. If people have accepted that there is no need to improve matters, they often also lack the ability to learn *how* to improve. This in turn leads to a lack of project managers in the organization who actively look for difficult projects because they enjoy the challenge and are eager to develop themselves further.

Good project managers do not avoid difficult projects, but look for them instead.

I call these apparent contradictions that have to be overcome the *&-&-&-paradox*: allowing for uncertainty *and* being flexible *and* completing the project successfully *and* enjoying the process! Project managers who strive to improve themselves in order to tackle more and more difficult circumstances are professionals who want to break through the *&-&-&-paradox*.

1.1 More with less

After this anecdote, you may recognize other forms of the *&-&-&-paradox* in project management. I describe three of them in this chapter. Note that for now I will only focus on the challenges that they present; the solutions are covered later on in this book.

1. **More with less:** the project must be completed as soon as possible *and* it must be possible to make changes along the way *and* the costs have to be reduced *and* the functionality has to improve *and*...
2. **Monitoring things closely** *and* giving your team **plenty of space**.
3. **Recognizing uncertainty** *and* **making a commitment** with regards to the project's completion date and costs.

I will cover the first challenge, more with less, in this section. The other two are covered in sections 1.2 and 1.3. By looking at more than just the project manager, it is possible to gain an insight into the environment in which the modern project manager operates. This illustrates the ways in which a project manager has to develop in order to stay successful.

Goodbye to trade-offs

The &-&-paradox describes situations in which choosing is not good enough. To illustrate this, I will use the example of three well-known car brands, Alfa Romeo, Volvo and Mercedes, and compare the situation of thirty years ago with that of today. A Volvo was a safe car and drivers took the boring design for granted. If you wanted design, you had to get an Alfa Romeo, although that design came at the cost of reliability. Mercedes, meanwhile, produced high-quality cars that combined reliability and design, yet customers had to pay a premium price to get one.

These days, this classic *or-or-or trade-off* is accepted less and less. As a result of technological developments, increased competition, globalization and collaboration between corporations, the bar is raised higher and higher. A lot of product characteristics have become standard. We are no longer willing to pay extra for quality. The same goes for extra features, safety, service level, etc. Similarly, the lead times for product development are becoming shorter and development costs have to be reduced. In other words, we have to do more with less. If you cannot meet these demands, you will fall behind: *we want it all*.



Do you recognize this growing demand for and-and-and?

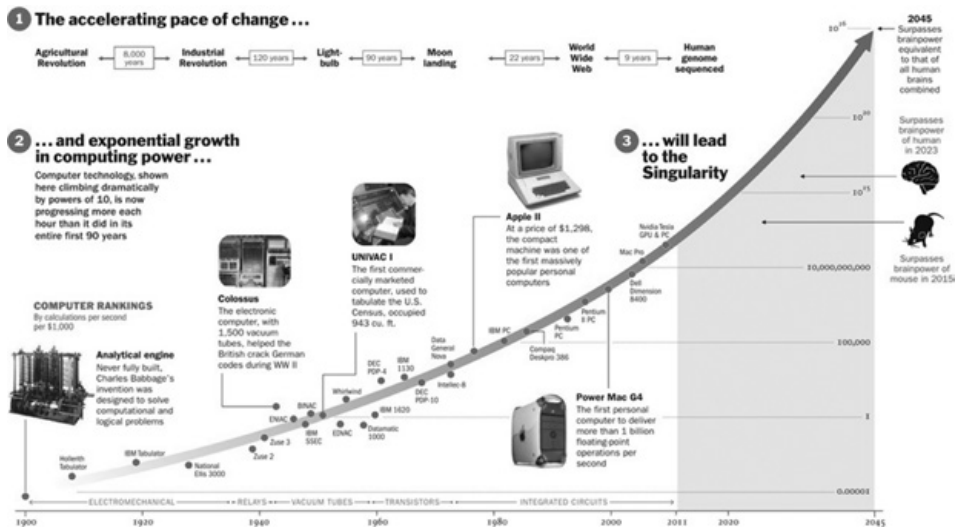
Expertise and creativity in leadership

We also want and-and-and in projects. One might say that, in this modern day and age, a project has to overcome the *devil's triangle*, which states that money, quality and time are all interconnected. Technologically speaking, that is certainly possible. Raymond Kurzweil, for example, describes an exponential pattern of technological progress that is changing our world at a breakneck pace. Ultimately, this will lead to *singularity* (figure 1.1). Singularity refers to the moment when technology exceeds the capacities of the human brain (Kurzweil, 1999).

Focusing on the present, we see that projects and organizations have become more complex as a result of the growing demands, but also due to inherent complexity. The &-&-paradox therefore creates challenges for, and imposes limitations on, the project team. Is that a bad thing? A football player who manages to score despite being marked by several other players is considered a hero. Cyclists want their races to be difficult, so only the best remain at the head of the pack during the final stages of the race. When you realize that everyone faces the limitations of the &-&-paradox, you could also say that the person who possesses the most expertise has the highest chance of success. Expertise pays off.

Imposing limitations stimulates one's creativity. Resolving the &-&-paradox calls for creative conceptual breakthroughs, because normal design improvements during product development result in a proportional increase in costs, components, etc. Smart solutions





What I remember most is that the CEO made it abundantly clear that this was a *temporary* state of affairs. He excelled at dealing with the second example of the &-&-paradox: monitoring things closely while also giving the team plenty of space. That made it easier for employees to participate and hang in there. The CEO was not micromanaging because he was a *control freak*; he had a clear message and wanted his staff to *follow his example* of critically evaluating all expenses. His motto was: “We are a mom-and-pop store once again,” which was his way of saying that everyone had to treat every source of income and every expense as if their own money was at stake. The old philosophy of “that is how we have always done things” was no longer good enough. You could only spend money you actually had and you had to know what value it would bring for the company. This measure was applied at every level of the organization.

This demonstrates the power of having a clear message, repeating it often and setting the right example yourself. As the American politician Benjamin Franklin once said: “*Tell me and I forget, teach me and I may remember, involve me and I learn.*”

During a real crisis, temporary measures are needed to increase control. This is a deliberate choice. Every project manager should be able to carry out crisis management. However, things go wrong if crisis management is applied when there is no actual crisis. In that case, it becomes a self-fulfilling prophesy. The crisis is caused by an excessive focus on control and accountability, in other words *micromanagement*.

You might say that the &-&-paradox of “monitoring things closely *and* giving plenty of space” is handled incorrectly in those situations. The focus on maintaining control becomes too strong and monitoring employees and understanding every detail becomes an obsession. This is often driven by a lack of faith in the intentions or abilities of others, or a lack of self-confidence.

Is attention to detail necessarily a bad thing? No! On the contrary, it is essential to maintain control over your project. *The devil is in the detail*. However, things can go wrong when it becomes an obsession and management claims an important role in all of the everyday processes. When that happens, decisions cannot be made until the (micro)manager has approved them and, if that were not enough, the manager also tends to prescribe every detail of the project execution. In other words, focusing on details is not the problem, but the micromanager who decides *which* details to focus on is.

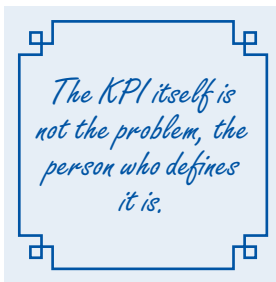
*When
micromanaging,
attention to detail is
not the problem —
obsession is.*

The result is that employees stop taking the initiative and start performing at an average level, instead of at the top of their game. After all, they are monitored and instructed to do just that. Additionally, this obsession causes the micromanager to lose sight of the real goal, actually achieving the project result! It is no wonder that the term “management” often

has negative connotations in our society; we are simply talking about the *wrong kind of management*.

Focusing on control

We see evidence of the excessive focus on control and the lack of focus on results and processes in our society as well. Recent problems, such as the financial crisis and the misuse of power within major organizations, have impacted our faith and trigger our neurotic reflex to add more control measures. New *Key Performance Indicators* (KPIs) are being introduced left and right. We should ask ourselves whether these are intended to improve the process or monitor the executors. KPIs are indicators, yet they are often misused as targets. As a result, employees chase after KPIs instead of doing what needs to be done. In doing so, the solution actually becomes worse than the problem itself.



Here is an example from the Dutch healthcare sector. After healthcare insurance providers were criticized for a lack of benchmarking regarding the quality of healthcare organizations, they got to work to improve their processes. They opted to use a system of “practice variation,” for which the declarations of GPs and other healthcare providers is statistically compared to data from similar providers. The goal is to filter out outliers without having to consult patients’ medical information (which is prohibited under the General

Data Protection Regulation). It is only after this initial filter process that healthcare providers with outliers are subjected to a more detailed study and asked to explain these deviations.

Used in that manner, this method is a means of control. Although it is possible to conduct all kinds of additional analyses with the help of data mining, it does not appear to result in better healthcare for patients. Healthcare providers are not thrilled about the measure either. They feel accused and their professional pride is hurt when they are asked to explain deviations regarding the practice variation KPI. Who can blame them? After all, there are many logical explanations other than fraud for a medical practice’s deviations from the average. In other words, it creates mistrust among the parties involved. In addition, the use of this method unsurprisingly causes healthcare providers to adapt to the monitoring method. This means the party being monitored will also focus on control instead of results, for example by planning patient care in such a way that it falls neatly within the averages. It would be better to tailor the process to the patients’ wishes in order to maximize patient satisfaction. This all but eliminates healthcare providers’ ability to innovate.

A focus on control instead of on results and processes is quite common in the public sector. It is often driven by the desire to focus on accountability. Of course, public sector organizations should be able to prove that they are spending their budget wisely, since they are using taxpayers’ money. Nevertheless, this is still a backwards perspective. It would be better to focus on finding the optimal path to the goal. That would truly be in the taxpayers’ best interest.

Defining KPIs is therefore a job that calls for systematic thinking. The creators of the *Business Balanced Scorecard (BBSC)*, Robert Kaplan and David Norton, already warned us that choosing KPIs requires care and attention with their use of the word “balanced” (Kaplan and Norton, 1996). First, a *connection* has to be established between the indicators of the various perspectives (for the BBSC, those are the financial, customer, internal business processes and learning & growth perspectives) to make sure that individual KPIs actually lead to results that benefit the organization. Furthermore, KPIs must be accompanied by a *complementary* KPI to prevent the process from shifting too far to one side. A well-known example is the call center, for which the “first call resolution rate” is a major KPI. It indicates what percentage of incoming questions are resolved right away. However, measuring just this KPI tells you nothing about how efficiently the organization resolves its customers’ questions. Adding a complementary KPI, e.g. “call duration,” will provide valuable insight into the company’s efficiency.

Defining balanced KPIs, combined with the fact that the substantiation of KPIs can make or break people’s confidence, makes clear that compiling a good set of measuring instruments is not easy and calls for the right kind of expertise!

Diminishers and multipliers

Many people spend their entire professional life trying to find the right balance between monitoring things closely and giving the team plenty of space. There is no shame in that. The American growth guru Verne Harnish has been studying the basic principles of organizational growth for years. In his book *The Rockefeller strategy* (Harnish, 2002), he explains – and this should not come as a surprise – that the only way to scale up is by delegating. He adds that 96% of all businesses have fewer than ten employees, with the vast majority of these having fewer than three. The reason for this, he claims, is the fact that most entrepreneurs fail to start delegating responsibilities.

The American leadership expert Liz Wiseman presents a different perspective on this &-&-paradox in her book *Multipliers - How the best leaders make everyone smarter* (Wiseman, 2010). She describes how to bring out the genius in others and get more than twice the results. Although we will strive for a *factor 10* in chapter 4, this is a great start. Based on her analysis of 150 managers, Wiseman states that organizations do not necessarily have a shortage of employees or other assets, but rather the inability to properly utilize the most valuable assets they already possess. In practice, most managers, whom she refers to as *diminishers*, fail to bring out the best in their employees. They exhibit behavior that curbs rather than stimulates their employees’ intelligence and creativity. On the other hand, *multipliers* manage to get more out of their people. Employees are willing to go to great lengths for this type of manager. Multipliers are able to uncover their employees’ hidden talents and have faith in their staff.

Even if you believe you are doing the right thing, everyone will – consciously or subconsciously – display diminisher behavior from time to time. For example, managers who have a strong



DIMINISHER		MULTIPLIER	
The Empire Builder	Hoards resources and underutilizes talent	The Talent Magnet	Attracts talented people and uses them at their highest point of contribution
The Tyrant	Creates a tense environment that suppresses people's thinking and capability	The Liberator	Creates an intense environment that requires people's best thinking and work
The Know-It-All	Gives directives that showcase how much they know	The Challenger	Defines an opportunity that causes people to stretch
The Decision Maker	Makes centralized, abrupt decisions that confuse the organization	The Debate Maker	Drives sound decisions through rigorous debate
The Micro-manager	Drives results through their personal involvement	The Investor	Gives other people the ownership for results and invests in their success

Figure 1.2 The five distinguishing disciplines of multiplier and diminisher behavior

drive to achieve results together might unintentionally keep others from taking charge because of their own abundant energy and enthusiasm. Wiseman calls these people *accidental diminishers*. Even though you may not consider her insights to be particularly groundbreaking, the five disciplines with which multipliers distinguish themselves from diminishers can certainly help you discover blind spots in your own behavior (figure 1.2). Furthermore, Wiseman states that everyone can learn to adopt multiplier behavior. There is still hope.

1.3 Recognizing uncertainty *and* making a commitment

Who has ever turned down an assignment because it was too unclear? Whenever I pose this question to project managers, I get a range of different responses. Some are quite firm and claim that an unclear assignment is a poor foundation for a successful project. Others shrug and say that an unclear scope at the start of a project is to be expected in their organization. They have accepted this fact and are used to it. The third &-&-&-paradox of recognizing uncertainty *and* making a commitment affects many project managers. Commitment is about moving forward despite any uncertainties (while risking your personal integrity) and creating the right expectations by doing so.

?

Have you ever returned a project to a client?

An organization's culture appears to be an important factor when answering this question. The response that "returning an assignment would not be appreciated" is quite common.

For many organizations, returning projects is not considered to be a good thing. Nevertheless, I wonder if this is truly the case, or if people simply assume it is and therefore never try. Later in this book, we will see that nothing is ever black and white and there are ways to control these situations and exert your influence. It is all about *how* you return an assignment. The results are often surprising. Regardless of your own approach, it also depends on whether your client is a diminisher or a multiplier. A diminisher will view the returning of the assignment as a refusal to do the work, while a multiplier will appreciate your honesty. *Know your audience!*

I recall that, to me, the option to return an assignment was a true revelation. I was about to start a new project for one of my first employers. At the time, they were working hard to improve their organization's project and quality management. One of the company's Quality Assurance Officers, tasked with supporting project leaders with regards to quality, said: "If the client did not send you a User Requirements Specification, it makes sense to return the assignment, because you have no idea what you are supposed to do!" Although I did not return the assignment that time, I did work with the client to clearly define the project scope. Fortunately, that client responded well to my request and helped me make the assignment sufficiently concrete. Being critical and firm and not simply starting my work with an unclear project description paid off in the end. I am still thankful to that Quality Officer for the valuable life lesson he taught me.

I should note that I did eventually return a different assignment at that same company. Instead of making any changes, they simply assigned the project to someone else who accepted it without hesitation. Although this project manager showed guts, he ended up having to work very hard to keep the unfocused project execution on track. Another valuable lesson: there is no optimal way to deal with the paradox of "recognizing uncertainty and making a commitment."

Expectations are created immediately

I believe that most project management methods have more similarities than differences. Depending on the specific field and vision, they may emphasize different aspects, but, with a little effort, they can fit together quite well. That is good, because although organizations often use different project management methodologies, this should not impede their collaboration and the management of the project as a whole.

Most project management guidelines also agree about the moment at which a project manager officially makes a commitment with regards to the required time, budget, resources, etc. Although IPMA's International Competence Baseline is not that explicit, the global ICB4 standard states, under the plan and control competence, that this moment occurs at the conclusion of the project initiation phase, as part of the *decision to fund* milestone. When using PRINCE2, you make a formal commitment upon delivery of the *Project Initiation Documentation* at the conclusion of the initiation stage. At that moment, the project management plan is delivered and approved as if it were a contract of sorts, the

project definition phase is completed and the execution phase can begin. The client and the contractor formally accept their respective obligations and responsibilities.

Traditional project management methods therefore assume that, as a result of the activities conducted during the definition phase, any uncertainties have been cleared up to such an extent that there is no more confusion about the project's budget, lead time, etc. The project management plan has been finalized and stabilized, and it is now time to stop thinking and start doing. However, we all know that things are never that simple in practice. At the conclusion of the definition phase, there are often still significant uncertainties. These may be caused by, for example:

- The project goal is unclear or it changes during the project.
- There is not enough knowledge about the desired solution to plan ahead. People learn as they go during the execution phase.
- The organization does not take the time to go through the definition process and jumps directly to the execution phase instead.
- There is a lack of decisiveness to make choices regarding the project scope, the desired solution or the use of resources.

A project manager often has to make a commitment when it is really too early to do so. It can help to extend the definition phase, but it is likely there will still be some uncertainties left – if the client is even willing to give you this extra time to begin with. There could be a practical reason for this: the project's end date is set, so extending the definition phase will automatically leave less time for the execution phase. If that is the case, waiting to make a commitment can seriously test the client's patience. There may also be a political reason, for example the clients know that what they want is impossible, yet they are unwilling to admit it. That presents you with an even greater dilemma - do you play along or not?



Perhaps the importance of *when* you make your commitment is relative anyway; you may be able to time your commitment, but not the expectations you raise. I often talk to project managers who are upset about the fact that their client starts drawing conclusions about lead times and budgets during the definition phase, before any formal communication has taken place. That makes sense and they are technically right to feel this way. However, even though an official commitment has not been made yet, expectations are raised – consciously

or subconsciously – from the very start. Although these expectations are informal, clients are not likely to care about or even realize this. If their expectations are not met, they are disappointed. Disappointed clients are less flexible and cooperative, which results in a downward spiral before the project is even underway. Surely, that is not what you want as a project manager?

A project manager, therefore, has to start managing expectations from the get-go. By definition, there will still be many uncertainties at that stage. For that reason it is crucial that

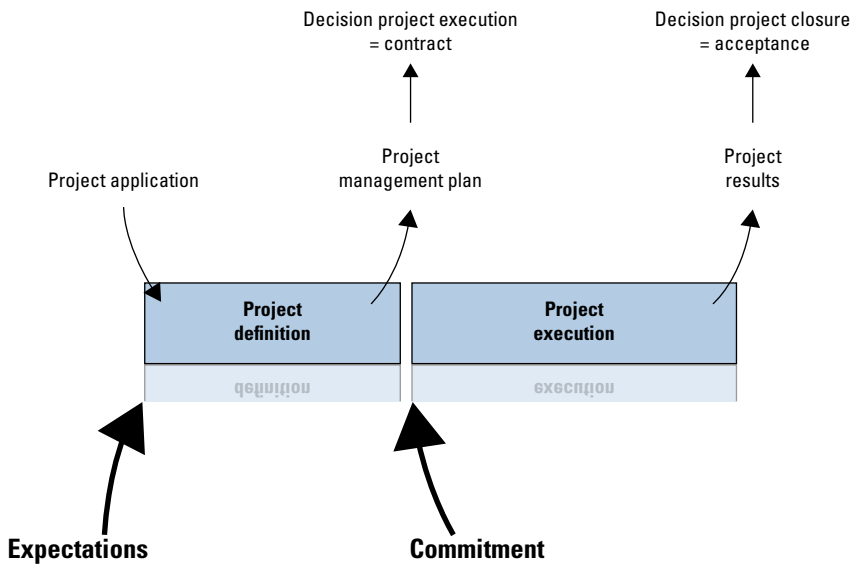
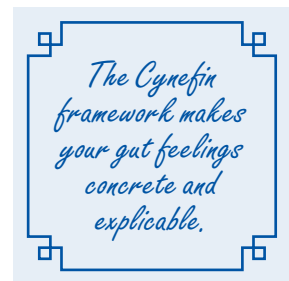


Figure 1.3 Expectations are raised long before a commitment is made

project managers are able to clarify the project scope and the expected delivery moments despite all the uncertainties that still exist, regardless of whether they are formally making a commitment or informally raising expectations.

Cynefin

Uncertainties concerning your project make it difficult to make a commitment. You probably know this to be true, even though it can be quite subjective. How complex is your project, really? Is the degree of uncertainty truly so great that it is impossible to make a stable plan, or is that simply due to your own inability? How do you keep the client satisfied in the meantime? What approach is best, taking into account the complexity of your project?



You can use the *Cynefin framework* (Snowden, 2007) to define how complex your project is. This framework was developed by Professor Dave Snowden. Cynefin (phonetically: kih-neh-vin) is a Welsh word that means something like “multiple factors in our environment and in our experiences affect us in a way we can never fully understand.” The Cynefin framework helps to determine the degree of complexity and uncertainty of the project. Furthermore, it answers the question of which actions and types of solutions are appropriate and which are not. It is therefore also a *decision-making instrument* that helps you choose the optimal project approach.

Snowden divides situations and problems into four quadrants (figure 1.4). Each quadrant has its own specific steps:

1. **Simple** (*sense* ⇒ *categorize* ⇒ *respond*): the solution is known in advance and easy to plan for.
2. **Complicated** (*sense* ⇒ *analyze* ⇒ *respond*): an expert is needed to determine the right solution.
3. **Complex** (*probe* ⇒ *sense* ⇒ *respond*): earlier solutions are not applicable. The solution and the plan are drawn up after conducting experiments.
4. **Chaotic** (*act* ⇒ *sense* ⇒ *respond*): drawing up a plan is not a top priority. First, it is important to take action and get the crisis under control. Only then will it be possible to identify the solution and make a plan.

It is interesting that Dave Snowden distinguishes between simple and complicated situations on the one hand and complex and chaotic situations on the other. For *simple* and *complicated* situations, the solution is known in advance – although simple situations can be resolved by anyone and complicated problems require an expert. In other words, the situation is predictable enough to draw up a plan and start the project execution.

This is not the case for *complex* and *chaotic* situations, because too many factors are unpredictable or changeable. Complex situations call for experiments that you can learn from; routine actions and standard solutions will not work. Rather, these situations require innovative and creative methods: try first, plan later. Chaotic situations, on the other hand, demand immediate action. There is an ongoing crisis that must be dealt with as soon as possible to restore order. Only then can work begin to determine the correct follow-up measures. Act first, before starting the definition phase.

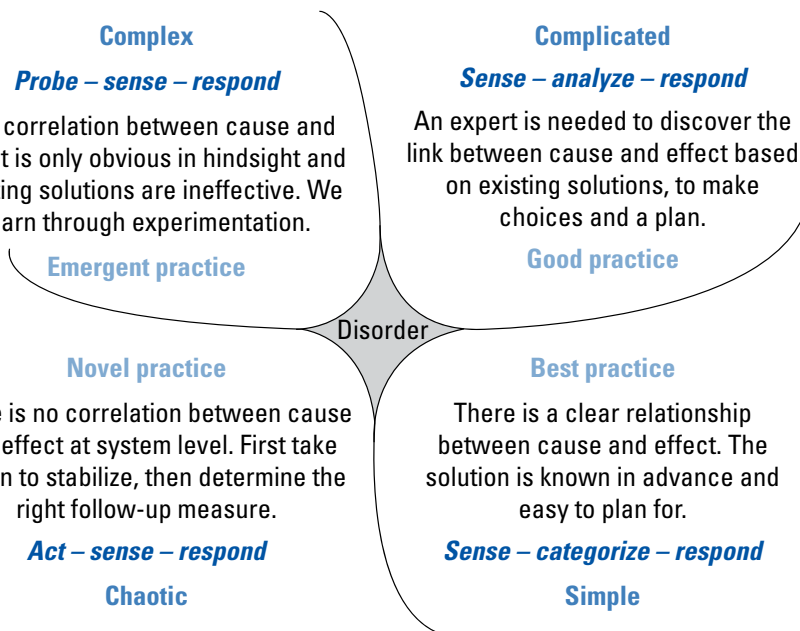


Figure 1.4 Dave Snowden's Cynefin framework