



The tradeoff

All sensible project management methodologies encourage tailoring and pruning – in PRINCE2, you would only use the full gamut of 45 process elements, 33 management products etc. on the most substantial and complex projects. If we load a team with excessively complex reporting requirements, we encourage simulated compliance and disengagement. But we need a certain amount of control, to stay out of trouble.

The illusion of control

In projects with many inevitable uncertainties – and that is modern life – the rituals of project management, and ritual objects like Gantt charts, can lead us into a trap. People come to believe that they have more control than they do – the trappings of control become a psychological prop. Risk Management is a particular case in point: if Risk Management processes result in objectively convincing action to mitigate the risks, then fine, by in my experience they often don't. Risk Management becomes a superstitious process, an attempt at exorcism, not a control process. Get a witch doctor, not a project manager – you will have more fun if nothing else.

Of course, if things go wrong, project management rituals do allow us to prove that they went wrong despite our best good-practice efforts. This is very useful to the individuals involved, but less so for the organisation.

How much is enough?

There is a minimum level of project management, which is usually adequate for quite significant projects. In budgetary terms, I've seen many examples in the £250K-£500K range. My "record" is £4M – it worked, although I probably wouldn't try it next time. The focus is on good tactical management of detail, with simple tools, and light-touch higher-level management. It leaves out a number of things you might expect. Here goes:

A well-written project definition

Obvious. In particular: stamp out wooliness in the project rationale and business benefits. Ensure *all* roles and responsibilities are clear, including those of the project sponsor and steering committee / project board. Allow time to debate the definition with all relevant stakeholders. Project success criteria are essential, but some of them may not be numbers – that is fine, there are still ways of assessing them.

Plan for uncertainty

You don't know where the big problems are going to be on the project. You don't know what the environment will do to you. Your organisation will be working on other things in parallel, so the strategic goalposts may move. Make sure that people understand that the project definition may well need to change. Try to agree the relative priority of the main parameters in advance: Cost? Timescales? Achieving business benefits? Delivering the deliverables? Keeping the stakeholders happy? They can't all be the top priority. If the weighting has been discussed, there will be less potential for conflict when the unexpected happens.

Gantt charts

Just the two: the overall project, and the current phase, each fitting on one page. You don't need project management software – Excel can be fine.

Tactical task management

When I joined IBM (in 1979), I was given a desk holder for 80-column punch-cards – we had repurposed them for to-do list items and messages. It is still on my desk. It says **“What is the best use of your time right now?”**. How do we answer that?

Encourage project team members to work with a well-structured, prioritised to-do list in a disciplined way. This is the home of the outstanding tasks, even if you use another process for creating a work breakdown. This is particularly important for anyone exercising leadership – I normally run with about 70 open tasks, many of which will be reminders to follow up things with other people.

Personally, I use a simple database, so that I can record a narrative of progressing a task, and quite a bit of other information, and still print it out in a usable form, prioritised as I want to see it. I find that much better than spreadsheets, for example. However, I've never quite managed to get everybody to be very disciplined on task management, so anything is better than nothing.

And no, you don't want a central database with shared visibility here, unless your organisation's culture is particularly strong on openness and trust.

Project Issues

Any question, problem or disagreement is a Project Issue if:

- Anyone involved lacks confidence that routine project work will resolve it without unplanned effects on costs, elapsed time, or achievement of benefits.
- And it could maybe affect the project success criteria.

Just about the most important task in project management is to make sure issues don't get stuck, or temporarily forgotten.

Here, a shared tracking system is very valuable. Anyone involved should be able to express concerns. Actions on issues will inevitably fan out to different people, so they must be able to record their actions easily. Anyone should be able to offer advice.

You also need a transparent issue closure process. Ideally, people should be able to identify themselves as serious stakeholders in an issue, and have a right to participate in signoff on closure. But don't make this too bureaucratic.

Set up your Project Issues process before anything serious or expensive happens on the project.

Project Risks

Project Risks can be treated as particularly significant issues. Use the PRINCE2 framework for risk tolerance: Grade issues for probability of non-resolution or occurrence, and impact on outcomes. Highlight issues which exceed the organisation's risk-tolerance when reporting to the Steering Committee / Project Board.

You need to do Risk Management, but it does not need to be complex.

Highlight reports

Your main way of reporting to the Project Board and steering committee. Short and simple, obviously.

- Progress: what tasks we completed in the last cycle, approximate percent completion of long-running tasks, targets for next reporting period.

- Other achievements during the reporting period, for example issue resolution, risk mitigation and positive stakeholder feedback.
- Reasons for not achieving what you told them last time.
- Green / amber / red warning lights for the outlook for achieving planned budget, timescale and benefits.
- Major outstanding issues and risks.

Back it up with a high level Gantt chart, and detailed descriptions and status of issues and risk, if it helps.

Stakeholder communication

A complex subject. Briefly:

- Communicate the positive. Explain the project rationale, benefits and relationship to strategy. Tell people about progress and achievements.
- Take all stakeholders seriously: any group or individual who is affected by the project and can influence its success
- A good project manager spends a lot of their time keeping stakeholders up to date, and discussing any concerns
- Avoid surprises at all costs. If stakeholders are expected to commit time and effort at some point, or will experience significant changes, this should be preceded by an expectation-setting process, usually involving a number of steps, starting well in advance. The same applies to potential problems.

Executive Sponsor / Project Board or Steering Committee

Senior management commitment – a very old theme. If the roles were clearly defined and discussed at the start, the project manager has a lever if you start to get high-level disengagement. You need an executive sponsor who:

- Appears to care about the project
- Is accessible at short notice, when the project manager needs help in resolving an issue or disagreement
- Comes and talks to project people – it is fine if the executive sponsor is a bit of a nuisance, as long as they don't try to micro-manage too much

In some cases, the Steering Committee can be almost redundant if you have a really good executive sponsor. I've been involved in great projects where the Steering Committee meeting were short and rather ritualised – but the Executive Sponsor and I worked frantically to give them an honest assessment, but avoid them actually having to worry about anything serious.

If you have a resourceful and alert project manager, they might introduce other tools and controls in particular situations, but try starting from here.

Stephen Scott, January 2008

Parts of this article are influenced by Rob Thomsett's book Radical Project Management, but others are not, and I take full responsibility for the overall emphasis.