



White Paper 2017-06

How Project Control Managers Can Step Up To Their Strategist Role

In complex Projects, strategy is about taking a medium/long term view and devising long-term action plans. Strategy is all about making sense of current events with sufficient perspective so as to respond adequately to what is happening. This capability builds on a systemic understanding of all the key drivers of Project success. In large Projects, the Project Control Manager is the only Project Team Member apart from the Project Manager that has the time and the means to develop that strategic capability. In this White Paper we explore how Project Control Managers can step up to the necessary strategist role.

How to Fulfil the Project Strategist Role

The keys to success include making sufficient time and keeping sufficient resources for the strategist role:

- Spend sufficient time on forecasting apart from actuals gathering and reporting,
- Always look for the root-cause beyond the obvious,
- Exploit inconsistencies from different functions as signals for evaluation.

Making sufficient time after Project start-up

It is essential for the Project Control Manager to have effectively setup the Project data collection system so as to require minimum time from his part, and leave free space to implement the strategist

role when the Project is in full execution. Having the Project Control Manager spend time trying to plug holes in the data collection system – or worse, spending inordinate time trying to reconcile inconsistent data - is the number one failure mode of an effective Project Control Manager.

Establishing an effective data collection system at the start of the Project requires a lot of personal discipline and leadership capabilities. At the start of a long Project people also do not necessarily feel the urgency. The Project Control Manager hence needs to be able to create that sense of urgency, supported by specific tools such as the Convergence Plan (refer to our [Scheduling Handbook](#)) which creates early milestones and the associated tension.

Successful Project Control Managers will thus concentrate in the first 2-3 months of Project execution in building efficient, scalable and as automatized as possible data collection systems to cover at least those areas of activity in the first months of the Project (refer to our [White Paper 2016-15 on Project Control Setup](#)). A bit more time will usually be available to setup data collection systems for Construction, but their setup still needs to be planned significantly in advance, so they the corresponding requirements for reporting and data transmittal are included in the Terms & Conditions for the contractors.

After the initial setup phase the Project Control Manager needs to change his focus and take a more strategic role. This requires less time spent churning numbers and reports, and more time thinking, analysing and observing. This change can be difficult for some Project Control

Managers with limited experience, and might require some coaching and mentoring, because it means getting out of a comfort zone churning numbers. As a rule of thumb, the Project Control Manager should be able to spend at least 30%-40% of his time on strategy-related roles (middle and long term considerations) after the first quarter of the Project duration. This is an average; typically more time will be available in the middle of the month and less during month-end reporting period.

Three Levels of Project Strategy Maturity

There are three levels at which the Project Control Manager can operate in his role as Project strategist:

- A basic level, where after the initial setup period the Project Control Manager positions himself as the go-to person of the Project Manager for any kind of analysis, scenario planning and forecast,
- An intermediate level where the Project Control Manager proactively raises to the Project Manager those deviations which appear after analysis to have possible significant consequences, as well as any evidence of a dysfunction in processes applied by the Project team,
- An advanced level where the Project Control Manager will propose creative, not immediately obvious strategies to enhance the value of the Project, taking a long term strategic view. These strategies often require a very long consistent implementation to be effective. At this level, the Project Control Manager acts effectively as a deputy Project Manager.

Depending on his experience, it is also not rare that the experienced Project Control Manager be pulled by the Project Manager to fill gaps or compensate on some process and systems-related issues, even if they appear in other functions such as Engineering, Procurement or even Construction.

The Project Strategist Analytical Toolkit

Comparison with benchmarks

A first important data point is to compare what is happening in the Project with available benchmarks and other ball-park figures, and understand the root causes of discrepancies. Contribution from the experience of the Project Management Team should be sought in that respect, as well as discussions with the estimating team.

The Project Control Manager must develop into a trusted advisor to the Project Manager.

Trend Analysis

Trend analysis is an extremely powerful and under-utilized tool in Project Control. It can be applied to Cost, Schedule and Risk. Trend analysis can be used very simply by plotting the outcomes of the successive Project Periodic Reports on a timeline, or in a more complicated manner, by extracting successive status information from databases.

Scenario Development

Scenario development is an essential tool to investigate possible alternative execution pathways. A full assessment generally requires the combined effort of all Project Control functions – Cost, Schedule and Risk, and possibly Contract as well.

Scenario development involves building alternate credible solutions for Project execution (or segments of it) and strength-testing these scenarios. In an advanced application, optimization approaches can be used so as to determine what the optimal solution between two extreme scenarios is.

Because it requires substantial time and effort, large scale scenario planning is generally not a very common event during Project execution, still it needs to be done at some crossroads points to support important Project execution decisions.

When implementing advanced systems for Cost Control and Risk Management, the capability to run scenario analysis is a key feature that is required; otherwise, scenario development becomes an even more tedious work which generally deters the team.

The Project Control Manager needs to head the scenario development efforts, because it is essential to include the intricacies of Cost, Schedule and Risk together to really evaluate the different alternatives.

Exploiting Inconsistencies and Looking for Root-Causes

One of the primary sources of information for the Project Control Manager is the identification of inconsistencies between the different control functions. By looking for the root cause of these inconsistencies and discrepancies, useful conclusions can be drawn on the performance of Project processes or on the unfolding of a situation that needs to be better understood and controlled. In addition, they are useful sources of Weak Signals (refer to our [White Paper 2017-04](#)) that are required to be analysed and fully understood.

It is essential that the Project Control Manager involves himself personally in the identification and investigation of these discrepancies so as to be able to draw useful conclusions.

It is essential for the Project Control Manager to have organized the data gathering and reporting system so as to have sufficient time and space to play the strategist role during Project execution

Conclusion

The Project Control Manager must develop into a trusted advisor to the Project Manager.

He must make the time after Project start-up to play an indispensable role of taking systematically a medium to long

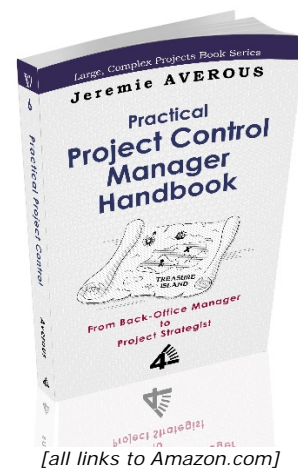
term view and help the Project Team respond rather than react to external events. Further, the Project Control Manager must be a key contributor and primary implementer of the Project strategy, in particular regarding Contract management. The full availability of Project data must enable him to develop fine analysis of events, identify Weak Signals and propose improvements and alternatives for the benefit of the Project.

Being relatively sedentary the Project Control Manager should also act as the reliable delegate of the Project Manager when he is on the road.

Find all these principles of Project Control Management exposed in a comprehensive manner in our new Handbook,

[Practical Project Control Manager Handbook](#)

(now published, available in [Paperback](#) and [Kindle](#) versions!)



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