



Book Stand Back and Deliver

Accelerating Business Agility

Pollyanna Pixton, Niel Nickolaisen, Todd Little and Kent McDonald
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Recommendation

Managing projects and solving difficult situations within organizations can be devilishly difficult. Complexity and uncertainty can provoke inappropriate, even counterproductive, judgments and actions. In such circumstances, you need special tools and processes to help you sort out your strategy and make better choices. Co-authors Pollyanna Pixton, Niel Nickolaisen, Todd Little and Kent McDonald provide effective mechanisms for managing projects and solving problems. They approach business decision making with careful deliberation, analytical precision and sound reasoning. Their book provides the support systems you need to weigh your options and address your business dilemmas. *BooksInShort* finds that leaders at all levels will benefit from knowing this book’s hands-on tools.

Take-Aways

- Project management can be baffling, particularly in an environment of rapid change.
- Unless you plan, organize and handle each step well, you can kill your project.
- With the right tools, you can manage four important areas of your project or program: purpose, collaboration, results delivery and decisions.
- Project planning requires more information than just a cost-benefit analysis.
- Focus your problem-solving efforts on core issues, not symptoms.
- The “Purpose Alignment Model” can help you mesh your strategy and the activities that differentiate your company.
- Use this evaluative tool to make choices in light of your strategic priorities.
- Foster collaboration to benefit from your staffers’ knowledge about your business.
- Use the “Context Leadership Model” to diagnose your projects’ complications and uncertainties.
- Develop “value models” as tools for making good decisions.

Summary

The Right Tools for the Job

Management is a remarkably tricky business. If you focus on the wrong factors, fail to get the needed buy-in, estimate poorly or make unfortunate choices, your business will suffer. To be an effective manager, you need to marshal the right resources, focus your efforts, determine your risks, get everyone on board, and deal with complexities and uncertainties. Some advanced project management or problem-solving tools (such as the “Purpose Alignment Model” and the “Context Leadership Model”) can help you make smart decisions and align your plans and activities with your company’s strategy. Leaders should pay attention to:

1. **“Purpose”** – Define and fulfill your company’s – and your project’s – real intent.
2. **“Collaboration”** – Use your employees’ combined expertise and knowledge.
3. **“Delivery”** – Produce and deliver your project despite “uncertainty and complexity.”
4. **“Decisions”** – Employ “value models” and “decision filters” to help you solve problems.

Purpose

To place yourself in the best position to allocate resources properly and to focus on your company’s primary marketplace objectives, make sure your projects support your organization’s basic purpose and strategy. The Purpose Alignment Model can help you connect projects and programs to their basic intent. It assesses processes and programs in two basic dimensions: “mission critical,” how important an activity is to your undertaking, and “market differentiation,” who your unique customers are. Four categories of activities – “differentiating, parity, partner” and “who cares” – sort out factors that show how a project connects to its purpose in order to promote better decision making and generate intended results:

1. **Differentiating: “Market differentiating and mission critical”** – Your firm handles these components so well that they anchor its market position. Invest properly in them.
2. **Parity: “Mission critical but not market differentiating”** – These functions (such as billing) are important, but they don’t make you stand out in the marketplace.
3. **Partner: “Market differentiating but not mission critical”** – These activities might be special, but they won’t make or break your firm.
4. **Who cares: “Neither market differentiating nor mission critical”** – Don’t devote much attention or many resources to mundane activities, such as office maintenance.

Using the Purpose Alignment Model

To make better decisions about your business in light of your highest strategic priorities, use the Purpose Alignment Model. First identify your company’s differentiating activities, the exact products or services that “win customers,” “gain market share” and “generate sustainable competitive advantage.” You can use a SWOT analysis (identify strengths, weaknesses, opportunities and threats) for this purpose. Or you can ask five differentiating questions about your customers: “Who do we serve and what do they want and need most?” “What do we provide to help them?” “What is the best way to provide this?” “How do we know we are succeeding?” and “How should we organize to deliver?” Once you identify these crucial activities, this tactical model calls for using them as “decision filters” to assess how the business efforts you are pursuing actually mesh with your company’s goals and “strategic intent.”

“The people who best understand the problems an organization faces and know the best way to solve them are the people who are already part of the organization.”

The sum is always greater than its parts, particularly within organizations. Your company has invested heavily in its people. Now, use collaboration to benefit from their combined expertise and knowledge about your projects, activities, business issues and corporate problems. To foster collaboration – which requires a free flow of ideas – create an environment where people can converse openly and objectively without fear of reprisal. Leaders are responsible for establishing this kind of trust, the crucial building block for an open environment. To foster a trusting atmosphere, retire the old command-and-control approach. Shelve micromanagement. Maintain transparency. Make sure your staff members feel comfortable discussing their concerns with you, including negative or sensitive subjects.

“Imagine the power you can unleash if everyone in your organization makes strategically and tactically aligned decisions.”

Collaboration works best when a strong team shares ideas. Recruit the best people in your organization to represent all its departments and disciplines. That is how Boeing built its famous 777 aircraft – the product of a five-year collaboration involving 10,000 people. Boeing made sure to include every employee who would ever be involved with the airplane in any way. This paid off when the driver of a Boeing refueling truck noticed that the plane’s “gas cap was in the wrong place” – a major design flaw. “We can’t get the gas up there,” the driver said. Catching such problems at the design stage is far less costly than finding them after the project is done.

“Because purpose alignment, collaboration, risk analysis and decision-making processes work so well together, it does not really matter which tool you use first.”

Collaboration involves brainstorming. One way to hold a brainstorming session begins with making sure your team members bring in plenty of sticky notes. Ask each individual, “What’s not working?” After each person writes answers on sticky notes, display the notes on the wall for everyone to contemplate. Have team members vote on what is “not working” the most.” Agree on some problem-solving goals, and let people work together to parse out your firm’s pressing dilemmas. Don’t “stifle progress” by interfering with your workers’ collaboration; they stand the best chance of addressing the predicament because they have firsthand knowledge.

Delivery

Risk management depends on dealing smartly with your projects’ “uncertainty and complexity.” Use strong, appropriate, experienced-based leadership to tackle these problems, which are common to many ventures. The “Context Leadership Model” can help you diagnose your projects’ complications and uncertainties, so you will be in a better position to deal with them. To use this diagnostic tool, determine which category fits your assignment:

1. **“Sheepdogs: simple projects with low uncertainty”** – You can easily control these noncomplex jobs. They require minimal documentation and “process ceremony.” Your best approach is to make sure your staff members understand the relevant goals and objectives, and then let them go to work.
2. **“Colts: simple projects with high uncertainty”** – These early-stage undertakings ignite high energy among those involved and lend themselves to “agile approaches.” Assemble small teams of close-knit workers.
3. **“Cows: complex projects with low uncertainty”** – These “cash cows” work with “mature systems” and sets of products. They need direct management by leaders with superior people skills. These tasks rely on massive teams of employees and clear interfaces with subsidiary projects. Cows demand strong “cross-team communication.” Many cows are an amalgamation of sheepdog projects.

4. **“Bulls: complex projects with high uncertainty”** – Clear communication and “iterative feedback” are critical to these challenges. Bulls often involve “next-generation products or solutions.” Because of their high uncertainty, bulls can quickly stampede out of control. Being both complicated and unpredictable, bull projects require seasoned, superior leaders who are expert at “project mechanics.” Organizations must be careful not to create more bull projects than they have expert wranglers to lead.

“Making decisions is not easy in a changing environment.”

Once you know if you are working with complexity, uncertainty or a combination, you can choose from some palliative options, including “splitting projects into subprojects” for simplicity’s sake or keeping cohesive teams united from one assignment to the next to reduce uncertainty by using their group knowledge.

Decisions

Managers often use cost-benefit analyses to guide their decisions. Unfortunately, such assessments (really estimates or “wild guesses”) are not always reliable, particularly regarding future activities – the core of many decisions. To make more solid decisions, set up three “value models” that ask, “What do we do?” “When do we do it?” and “Should we continue doing it?”

“Most people dislike uncertainty. They would rather take the risk of making a wrong decision now than live with the uncertainty for as long as necessary to improve their chances of making the right decision later.”

Value models define the parameters of decisions to help you deliver “value to the marketplace.” To develop a value model for making decisions about a particular initiative, first identify the program’s or project’s “purpose, considerations, costs and benefits.” To unearth the purpose, ask, “Why do we do this?” If you can align your decisions with your firm’s purpose, you will be on the right path. To define the considerations at hand, ask your staffers: “What is the problem?” “Who does it affect?” “What’s the impact?” “What’s a successful solution?” Consider what will happen if your company does not embark on this project or program. If it is an ongoing endeavor, ask, “Should we continue doing it?”

“Common sense is sometimes preferred to common practice.”

In deciding what factors to weigh in your value models, think “beyond costs and benefits.” Determine the initiative’s impact on your delivery of services and on your firm’s flexibility. Establish how it will affect your product line. Gather reliable information for making a cost-benefit analysis and for evaluating uncertainties, risks and complexities. Delivering solutions in chunks, instead of trying to resolve everything at once, may let you adjust as you go along.

Putting It All Together

Knowing when to step up and lead, as opposed to stepping back and giving your employees room to operate, is a fine balance. Identifying this leadership “tipping point” requires managerial skill. Make sure your business models are straightforward and simple. Forget finding a silver bullet model that will work in all situations. None exist. Be aware that most business problems involve the same “root causes.” As your use of diagnostic tools digs out these causes, focus on solving them, not on attacking their symptoms. The order in which you employ your evaluative and decision-making tools doesn’t matter. The most important step is to begin. A few tips:

- **“Pick any pain point”** – Focus on some baffling issue that makes your employees struggle.
- **“Convene the right people”** – Bring in the staffers whom a problem most affects.
- **“Why do we care?”** – Ask them which solutions they think may work.
- **“Pick a starting point”** – Use the appropriate model. If you face a strategy issue, use the Purpose Alignment Model. If the issue concerns project organization, start with the Context Leadership Model. If you are not sure “what to do and when to do it,” create a value model. If none of these approaches applies, ask, “What’s not working?”
- **“Use the collaboration process”** – Let your staffers help you decide how to proceed. Make sure they are on track to achieve results that align with your firm’s strategy.
- **“Ask questions – reaffirm ownership”** – The right questions promote team problem solving, but some questions are counterproductive. Don’t ask, “What’s wrong?” because that is too judgmental. Don’t ask, “Where are you stuck?” because that is presumptive. Instead, try to get your employees to discuss the project or problem, including current approaches and possible solutions. Help them develop fresh perspectives.
- **“When you see your own red flags”** – Keep fighting complexity and uncertainty. Ask, “Do you have too many differentiating projects?” “Have you got the right leaders on the projects?”
- **“Motivation”** – The “three Cs: collaboration, choice and content” are great tools for building enthusiasm.

“Purpose is not priority.”

Effective leaders allow their team members to supervise their own workloads and develop their own fixes. Your job is to ensure that their “solutions, objectives and goals” align with your organization’s overall strategy and achieve the desired results. Do not assume ownership of your team’s specific responsibilities. If you take charge, the members will begin to turn their problems over to you to fix. Your role is to ask the right questions, not to supply the answers. Good questions will prompt your staff to develop creative responses to their challenges.

About the Authors

The authors are all partners at Accelinnova. **Pollyanna Pixton** heads Evolutionary Systems. **Niel Nickolaisen** is strategic planning director at Headwaters, Inc. **Todd Little** has vast software experience. **Kent McDonald** has been a program manager in numerous industries.