

1

A project or simply a task?

The need for a clear definition

In this chapter we focus on the basics of working on projects, namely the identification and the definition. We also cover the preconditions as these will be decisive in obtaining the targeted results.

Choosing to set up the work as a project?

Market situations, rapid changes, desires and demands on the part of clients, shareholders, government and your own company often force us to do business more speedily, more effectively and in a more closely targeted manner. Companies are often involved in different sorts of activities that define the way that different jobs are carried out:

- Routine: Ongoing activities for which guidelines and procedures already exist; the goals and the methods to be used are specific and familiar. The hallmarks: clearly defined, familiar and repetitive.
- Ad hoc: Activities that are needed in a hurry, the result of a request and in many cases new. The hallmarks: urgent, requiring flexibility and improvisation.
- Project-led: Activities that are also new, but where it is often possible to plan them better (in contrast with improvising in ad hoc situations); so that the outcome can be controlled better. The hallmarks: mainly important, new, require a planned and results-oriented approach.

We could say therefore that a project-led approach is a results-oriented, generally request-led but better planned (but perhaps not yet familiar) type of activity that can make an

important contribution to achieving the desired goal. Which criteria do companies apply when choosing to adopt a project-led approach in response to a request? We should ask ourselves a number of questions:

- Do the results justify the strategy, vision and mission, in other words: Are the efforts worth the price and do these fit in with the company objectives?
- Is the choice of this approach (working to a plan, including budget, size of the project, time to be invested and resources required) the most effective way or are there other alternatives?
- Is there sufficient support for the project?
- Does it contribute to strengthening activities or market position? In other words: What are the advantages of this project?
- Is the company in a position to adopt a project-led approach? In other words: Can the company provide the necessary resources and back-up that are needed to ensure the successful execution of a project?

A project therefore may be the result of a request (one that is market-led for instance: to develop new products or services), or out of necessity (in order to remain competitive) or because this approach will ensure that the desired results are obtained more quickly (by adopting a multi-disciplinary approach).

Definition of a project

If you ask a number of project leaders at random for their definition of a project, you will find yourself with a number of different answers. It is often not really clear exactly what is meant by the word 'project'. In order to avoid misunderstandings and misinterpretations we need to use one single definition which is actually the starting point of this book and which expresses my vision of a project-led approach.

My definition of a project is as follows:

The mission of a project is the one-off execution of a number of activities, limited in time, with a clear goal and desired results and with the necessary resources. The client is the person with the problem and the project leader is tasked with carrying out the project together with a multi-disciplinary team.

What does this definition mean in detail? In the first place, the definition states that this is a one-off activity where the official roles are reserved for the person with the problem (the client) and the person who will solve the problem (the project leader). Both have clearly defined tasks, levels of authority and responsibilities as we will observe as we proceed through this book.

Secondly, it involves a clearly delineated activity: What forms and what does not form part of this project? One example would be carrying out research that would produce a research report. Another example may be carrying out research that would foresee a series of recommendations. And a third example would be carrying out research that includes recommendations. If there is no clear discussion beforehand about exactly what forms part of the project, you may end up with a project team heading off on the wrong track or working on the wrong issues or with results that do not meet the expectations.

Thirdly, we mentioned resources. Money for instance is required (or back-up materials such as software programmes or hardware) in order to achieve the desired goal. Formal discussions about budgets and resources (space for carrying out tests in a factory for instance) play an important role when working on a project.

Fourthly, we mentioned a (in most cases) multi-disciplinary team: expertise and contribution of different people with different disciplines is essential if you are to guarantee reaching your desired results.

And last but not least we mentioned a clear goal and well defined results in order to highlight the importance and the direction of the project. If you don't know what results you are looking to achieve, you will have problems preparing the route you need to take and outlining the actions you need to undertake in order to achieve this goal.

Furthermore:

- routine tasks do not come under the definition of a project; projects are unique and one-off
- projects can be complex; examples may include commissioning projects for new constructions or co-operative ventures between different companies (or countries) as in the case of the launch of the Euro
- adopting a project-led approach can involve a certain amount of risk; it is not always possible to have 100% of the information you need and during the process certain assumptions, goals and results may have to be modified. This is just a logical consequence of course of the one-off nature of a project: it is something that has never been carried out before. If you knew how this activity should be carried out, then it would no longer meet the criteria of the original definition.

I often notice that on being asked to explain the characteristics of their project my interlocutors suddenly begin to hesitate and the obvious nature of a project definition is the one aspect that is the least mentioned. In this book I assume that a project only becomes a project when it meets the criteria of the definition that I have described above. By so doing it is also my intention to confirm that a project – just like adopting a project-led approach – is linked to a number of preconditions that will define to a large degree the success of this type of project. This also implies that support is needed from within the company if these preconditions are to be met.

The difference between a project and a task

Not all activities will meet the criteria of my definition of a project. Any activity that is lacking one or more hallmarks of the definition, is what I call a task. The most common difference between a task and a project is the nature of the activity. A task can easily be done by one person, while a project depends on co-operation between different disciplines. The goal of a task is familiar and it is clear how it needs to be carried out. It might well involve an activity that comes up regularly. A task does not per definition need to be carried out by a multi-disciplinary team; in these instances you will often see a delineation of tasks and activities within a department where everyone knows very clearly what they need to do. A task will also have a specific timeframe because there is a deadline involved.

You might think this is quite clear and simple. And yet we very often see assignments being called projects. Perhaps because the word project sounds more chic than the word than task. Perhaps also because people are not yet familiar with the difference between a project and a task. And also because – and this is particularly prevalent today – it is becoming increasingly fashionable to adopt a project-led approach to everything. The name project is sometimes used figuratively. You can't quite put your finger on it, but you get that annoying feeling that in fact something quite different needs to be achieved. And you are the one who has to sort it out. The objective is vague; and you are probably dealing with a hidden agenda here.

Let me quote a few examples:

- A reorganisation, where tasks, responsibilities and levels of authority and sometimes even whole departments are restructured, can sometimes be implemented more easily under the auspices of a project called 'optimisation'. When the first signs of resistance and opposition raise their ugly heads, they simply choose another project leader, you have not succeeded in doing your job well enough.
- The boss's hobbyhorse (a new software system for instance) is suddenly given priority.
- A big change in the organisational structure is suddenly necessary in order to increase shareholder value.
- Staff who underperform can be allocated completely different job functions under the guise of streamlining core activities.

The essence of a project

As we saw earlier it is important to check whether the nature of the activity and the execution of the tasks require a results-oriented and planned approach. If you can achieve the desired result simply, it makes no sense to set up a project structure for the work; it

would be more of a hindrance and would possibly cost you more time and money than needed. If it is a complex activity where you need to temporarily use more disciplines and you do not have all the information and knowledge you need in order to define precisely how to achieve the desired results, a project-led approach will save you time. This is also because unknown factors can create problems for you if you are working to a tried and tested plan or strict procedures. You will need to explore together with all the parties involved how the project can be carried out.

Choosing and creating a project is not always such a well-structured affair, believe me. Here is a practical example:

‘What we do here is that if I have a good idea, I report it to the Management Team, who then approves it. That means I am then project leader and I can get started. On the one hand I find that very practical, because at least then something is done, on the other hand however, I have started becoming more careful about spouting my ideas, because I always end up being the fall guy.’

The question is whether this is a practical approach to take. In these cases the person with the problem (the client as we saw earlier) is also the project leader (the person who has to solve the problem for the person with the problem) and he is often also responsible for the specialist content (and thus has an executive role, as a member of the project team). Can this possibly produce the desired result? The chances of this are not great. Because there is an immediate conflict of interests: namely those of the client, who wants to have his problems solved, and those of the project leader, who wants to approach this problem in a certain way. The risk when specialised content is involved is that there is too little exploration of alternatives because everyone involved works in the main from their own particular framework of reference.

In this book you will learn which skills, possibilities and influences you need in order to reach your goal; how to structure the project and what role and position you need to play in this, because...

If the preconditions are not in place, the chance of a successful project will be scuppered from the word go. You may want to ask yourself whether you want to be part of this.

To summarise

A project is:

- unambiguously defined in terms of results and objective
- delineated in terms of activities

- delineated in terms of time (start date and end date)
- allocated the necessary money and resources.

A project has:

- a client and a project leader
- a multi-disciplinary team.

Assignments usually means activities that are not one-off and which are lacking a number of essential hallmarks as quoted in the definitions. A project-led approach is systematic way of working and includes clear agreements about preconditions and personal responsibilities.

2

*There is never enough time to do it
well the first time round,
but there is enough time
to have to do it over again...*

The art of adopting a project-led approach

In this chapter we examine in more detail the art and characteristics of working on projects. What we refer to here is adopting a project-led approach and not project management therefore. Project management is often about the structure of the project itself, while adopting a project-led approach is more about integrating a number of different aspects.

The context of the project-led approach

In the definition that I used above, adopting a project-led approach is valid mainly for those new activities where the knowledge that is required already exists within the company, but where the activity itself is so unique in nature, that it is difficult to execute within the existing structures and procedures. In these instances it is important to use the four mainstays for adopting a project-led approach:

- working in a results-oriented way: remaining targeted on the objective and the desired end result throughout the whole process
- phasing: splitting up the whole project into logical parts (phases)

- planning: putting the different activities into an order of priority
- decision-making: the decision-making process relating to the progress and the different monitoring aspects (money could be one example of this for instance).

Of equal importance is the way in which a project is carried out and by that we mean integrating the following:

- 'I' aspects: the managing skills of the project leader, communications skills, qualities, personal responsibilities and personal effectiveness
- 'we' aspects: co-operating with the project team and the client, negotiating and dealing with conflicts, dealing effectively with the different interests of different players and environmental factors such as (cultural) differences for instance
- 'it' aspects: the technical structure of the project, results-orientation, phasing, planning, decision-making and monitoring. Also called hard skills.

A project-led approach is always based on the notion that at the beginning of the project all the data and facts are far from being complete and that during the process a number of assumptions will need to be modified. In practical terms this means working according to the principle of 'from rough to smooth'. The consequence of this way of working is that a number of uncertainties, unexpected circumstances and risks usually emerge that often lead to extra tension or frustration. For some people this presents a challenge and they are able to enjoy these unexpected situations to the full while others try to control the project with all their might and to the best of their abilities. The charm – if you like – the character of a project-led approach is that not all the factors and all the activities are available beforehand. If you have problems with this and it creates (too much) stress for you, then you have to ask yourself if this way of working is really right for you.

Adopting a project-led approach also means adopting the principle of participating and delegating. By participating we mean that the project leader creates the preconditions within which he or she encourages the members of his or her team to actively participate in executing the project. By delegating we mean that the client commissions (preferably with a very clear description) the assignment to the project leader. The project leader carries out these assignments with his team within these established preconditions and aiming at the mutually defined goals and results. The whole of this book in fact is a step-by-step example of how you might go about working on a project:

- we started with the definition of the concept of the word 'project'
- we are now going to look at the technique of adopting a project-led approach
- we will then continue with taking on the project which includes an in-depth look at the problem-oriented approach compared to the solution-oriented approach (Chapter 3)
- the next section covers selecting your team, putting it together, using the qualities of your team members effectively and your role and position (Chapter 4)

- leadership and basic elements for successful co-operation come next (Chapters 5 and 6) focusing on generating support and ensuring everyone takes personal responsibility
- the importance of effective communications for yourself and your team, in co-operation with the client and interested parties when adopting a project-led approach (Chapter 7)
- bringing influence to bear (Chapter 8), culture, environmental factors and conflicts (Chapter 9)
- and finally ensuring that your approach is effective and that you maintain a healthy attitude when adopting a project-led approach (Chapter 10).

These are all the themes that relate to the 'I' and 'We' aspects in particular. But as we said earlier, what is essential is integrating all the different aspects: you can well imagine that you will need a structure and a method (that you can test and follow) as well as social skills in order to co-operate effectively with your team, your client and all the different interested parties. Moreover it is advisable to take into account all the factors that may have an impact on your project. In order to provide you with a framework, a structure, we need first of all to look at one of the four mainstays of a project-led approach, namely phasing.

Phasing

When we use the term phasing, we mean splitting up the project into phases (logical sections if you like). We use six different phases:

Initiation phase, Definition phase, Development phase, Preparatory phase, Realization phase and Evaluation phase.

THE INITIATION PHASE: THE PROJECT ASSIGNMENT

In an ideal world your client will ensure that you are given a clearly defined assignment that you can then, as project leader, carry out together with your project team. Imagine; some district council invites you to come and discuss a new project. You have agreed with the representative who enthusiastically explains to you that this project is very important and you feel very honoured that you have been asked. The goal of the project is to achieve 'significant reduction in waste in the district within one year'. You are now with the representative and after an introductory talk he looks at you expectantly.

What do you think? What questions will you want to ask? What do you want to know? Make some notes and list your questions. Let's zoom in a bit closer on this project:

WHAT PRECISELY IS THE PROBLEM?

What I have given you here is just an example. It could be that it is too hypothetical for you if you work for a company and not for a district council. But let me ask you to give me an honest answer to my question: How often do you really know precisely what is the problem and how often do you take the time to look at it thoroughly before you say: 'Yes, I'll carry out this project'? The most important aspect of starting up a project is to obtain a very firm answer to: 'What precisely is the problem here?' The mountain of waste is clearly the problem I hear you say. And the quantity must be drastically reduced. The project description therefore becomes: significantly reducing the mountain of waste.

Defining the problem

It is about waste, that we know already. Have you thought about asking what sort of waste is involved? Is it clear to you what is meant by 'significant'? And is the significant reduction translated into tons or percentages and compared to what? What is the reason for the project and why does it need to take place now? And what is the actual request? Is it really about reducing the previously specified amount of waste? Do you also need to look at other options such as influencing consumer behaviour or discussing with the packaging industry to find a way of producing more environmental-friendly packaging? Or would sorting waste provide an acceptable solution? In short, a whole slew of questions that could be and must be asked and answered.

Look at your list of questions: are your questions relevant to what you wanted to know?

How can I ascertain what it is really about? A handy and important skill for you is to ask questions. And to keep on asking questions. How can you do that? Prepare yourself as well as possible; write down the questions that you want answers to at any price. Make a checklist. I have noted down a few suggestions:

- where did the problem start (*background information, what has been tried and what were the results*)?
- what is the problem (*what is it specifically about*)?
- why now (*why the urgency of and the need for the project; what is the importance*)?
- what needs to happen (*what results, formulated as practically as possible, what needs to be achieved*)?
- why you (*has the choice been well thought through*)?
- what with (*what resources are available; which people; do you have a say about the members of your team*)?
- are there specific preconditions or basic aspects that need to be taken into account (*delineation and identification of possible risks and feasibility*)?

A lot of questions therefore that you should approach constructively and openly but also critically. You must listen well and above all try to get to what is exactly behind the problem so that you can decide for yourself if you really are the right person, in spite of