Lead Successful Projects
Antonio Nieto-Rodriguez
(A book review by R. Max Wideman, FPMI)

Introduction

This handy little book contains a wealth of practical information for organizing and running large infrastructure projects. It is written by author Antonio Nieto-Rodriguez who has been lucky enough to be involved in a large number of significant projects in Europe and elsewhere. He has used his years of experience to come up with logical set of ten principles. Each of these are elaborated into sage advice for the otherwise unsuspecting CEO, and his or her underlings responsible for the success of their outcomes.

As Antonio says in his Introduction: [1]
> "No matter what stage you have reached in your career, or which profession you work in, you will certainly have been involved in many projects – some of the successful, others less so. Projects are universal, but t hey can also be highly complex endeavors that require some basic elements to be in place in order to be successful. However, most of us have not received training in the methods and tools that are vital to project success.

> This book's purpose is to fill that gap and provide you with an easy-to-apply framework – the 10 Principles of Project Success – to help you and your organization succeed in the new project-driven economy."

About the author[2]

Born in Madrid, Spain, and educated in Germany, Mexico, Italy and the United States, Antonio is an economist with an Executive MBA from London Business School. He is fluent in five languages. Antonio was the global Chairman of the Project Management Institute in 2016. At the time of writing he is Director of the Program Management Office of GlaxoSmithKline Vaccines. Previously he worked as Head of Project Portfolio Management at BNP Paribas Fortis. He has also worked for ten years at PricewaterhouseCoopers, becoming the global lead practitioner for project and change management.

Book Structure

After a brief Introduction, this book is set out in fifteen chapters with three Appendices as follows:
1. The emergence of projects
2. What are projects?
3. Reinventing project management
4. Principle #1: Everything starts with ideation
5. Principle #2: A clear purpose informs and inspires
6. Principle #3: The sponsor is both advocate and accountable
7. Principle #4: Customer needs drive the solution
8. Principle #5: Realistic planning involves both ambition and pragmatism
9. Principle #6: The perfect is the enemy of the good

The book has a total of 176 pages on a small footprint of 8"x5". It does not include a Glossary of Terms.

What we liked

It is a real delight to have the project management experiences of a well-qualified practitioner, all converted into practical advice in a handy little book. And that advice is also documented in a logical format that can be referenced for intended or on-going projects that are both large and very costly. The book is well written in a clear and easy-to-read style. Where needed, there are five figures to add clarity. From our own relatively limited experience, we believe that all the author's advice, page after page, is well worth digesting and repeat-reading to refresh the memory when needed.

To emphasize his observations, Antonio includes brief summaries of a range of serious project failures, as well as some successes against significant risks and odds. They provide excellent lessons and much detail, but too extensive to be included in this review. Instead, use the following lists to do searches on the Internet – add the word "project" to the title if missing.

Projects challenged or outright failures[3]
- Saint Helena Airport
- Russky Bridge, Vladivostok, Russia
- Oil and gas megaprojects
- International Space Station (ISS)
- Boston's Big Dig
- Energiewende
- Purchase of 60 buses for the Nelson Mandela Bay Metropolitan Municipality in South Africa[4]
- Uplace Shopping and Leisure Project in Belgium — stakeholders can kill your project[5]

Lessons from successful projects
- Project Purple — the iPhone[6]
- Lessons from the Google Glass[7]
- Lessons from Crossrail[8]
- London Olympics[9]
- Lessons from Stonehenge — a difficult project challenge not yet resolved[10]
- Launch of the Euro (January 1st, 1999)[11]

Book's purpose

As Antonio says in his Introduction:[12]

> "Most of us have not received training in the methods and tools that are vital to project success. [Therefore] This book's purpose is to fill that gap and provide you with an easy-to-apply framework – the 10 Principles of Project Success – to help you and your organization succeed in the new project-driven economy.
>
> The principles are based on my years of experience and research covering hundreds successful and failed projects, ranging from the smallest to the largest and most complex. The 10 Principles an be applied by any individual, team, organization or government, and are suitable for any kind of project."

Antonio also added:[13]

> I recommend that you also use the principles as an evaluation checklist, either at the beginning or when the project is running. This will give you as sense of how well the project fundamentals have been taken into account, and whether the project has a good chance of being successful. It will also allow you to focus on what you really need to do."
>
> "Make no mistake, we are witnessing the inexorable rise of the project economy."[14]

To provide clarity, Antonio first provides his perspective of the project management environment as follows:[15]

> "The word 'project' is extensively used, yet largely misunderstood. There is confusion about what is and isn't a project, as well as the nature of project management. So let's start by defining some simple terminology.
>
> Projects are limited in time; they have a start and an end. They require resources, often from different areas of expertise and backgrounds, bringing together people who have never worked together before. Projects are made up of a series of planned and costed activities, designed to deliver a new product or output, at least one element of which is unique. In other words, a project is something that has not been done before.
>
> If a project delivers a ***defined outcome*** (a new product, a new piece of software, a new building, a new organization, etc.) [then] a program delivers ***capability***; the organizational structures, processes, skills and knowledge that enable new behavior. Programs are composed of several, sometime hundreds, of projects, and are much longer in duration."

For comparison, "Operations" refers to the core element of most organizations that include all of the activities required to run the business. For example, in a manufacturing business, these might be: Purchasing (supply materials), design, production, distribution, marketing and sales.[16]

Consequently,[17]

> Projects are the activities that change the business to ensure it is sustainable, and successful, in the mid and long term. They differ from daily operations in the following ways:

- Projects are one-off investments designed to achieve predetermined objectives.
- Projects are restricted in terms of time and budget and are staffed with temporary team members.
- Projects need different types of resources[18] than operations. Project leaders need to work across sectors to bring different views together and thus require diplomacy and negotiating skills. They also need to be good at managing uncertainty, because large strategic projects are unpredictable.

In the case of project management, Antonio notes that two elements should be born in mind. The first is a focus on the so-called hard-technical elements of projects, which is to manage such things as scheduling, scoping, finance and risks. The second is the softer elements of project management, which is to manage people, behavior, culture, communication and change.[19]

Obstacles to project success

Antonio says that his research shows that the traditional functional company's poor project management skills,[20] and the resulting poor project performance, can be linked to seven main obstacles:[21]

1. *Absence of uniform methods and standard processes*
    The existence of a well-defined project management methods and processes – referred to as the project management "methodology" – identifies those companies that have the best chance of consistently delivering satisfactory project results.[22]
2. *Misalignment of organizational structures with the company's changing reality*
    The alignment and balance of the organizational structure need to reflect the shift towards change-the-business activities. More often than not, management underestimates or completely ignores this requirement.[23]
3. *Lack of appropriate governing structure to support strategy execution*
    The absence of the right governing structure is another important reason why traditional hierarchical organizations have difficulty supporting and following up on strategy execution.[24]
4. *Lack of a project execution culture, skills and leadership attention*
    Many companies lack a clear execution culture, an omission closely linked to the fact that many senior executives ignore the full potential of project management.
5. *Complexity of tracking and forecasting project costs, financials and benefits*
    It is well known that "What gets measured gets done". However, what gets measured easily is much more likely to be deemed important.[25] Nevertheless, if you want to get something done, then measure it!
6. *Inadequacy of systems and tools for monitoring strategy execution*
    Company shareholders, boards and even financial analysts rarely demand detailed information about the key projects and change-the-business activities once the investment decision has been made.[26]
7. *Lack of focus*
    Collectively, the problems associated with how organizations manage their portfolio and projects within it may be described as a lack of focus. Being focused is difficult and requires discipline.[27]

To which we might added:
8. *Lack of a detailed business plan to justify the project in the first place.*
    In other words, a failure to work through the front-end Ideation Phase, which is what the "Principle" chapters of this book are all about.

The 10 Principles of Project Success[28]

1. **Everything starts with Ideation**: *Innovation, exploration, experimentation*
    Allow the time and provide the resources to imagine before you establish an active project.
2. **A clear purpose informs and inspires**: *Rationale, (dis)benefits, sustainability*
    Develop a simple purpose statement that articulates both the problem and solution.
3. **The sponsor is both advocate and accountable**: *Advocate, godparent, executive*
    Select a sponsor with the necessary level of belief, skills and authority, and require them to

provide sufficient time and focus.

4. **Customer needs drive the solution**: *Voice of the customer, definition, design and scope, requirements and boundaries.*
   Put your customers at the front and center, and involve them throughout the project.

5. **Realistic planning involves both ambition and pragmatism**: *Process, milestones, resources, cost*
   Temper your ambition with a realistic assessment of the available resources, time and budget.

6. **The perfect is the enemy of the good**: *Test, assure, excel*
   Use your imagination to progress one step at a time towards a successful outcome.

7. **Well-managed uncertainty is a source of advantage**: *Anticipate, monitor, mitigate*
   Ensure an approach to risk and uncertainty that sustains a tension between pace and assurance.

8. **Stakeholder involvement is required and continual**: *Identify, communicate, engage*
   Start with an understanding of your stakeholders and their understanding of the project and sustain this throughout the process.

9. **A high-performing team and culture are indicators of the health and resilience of a project**: *Team, project, organization*
   Invest time to develop techniques to measure and sustain your team's motivation, capability and performance.

10. **Project-driven organizations build capability to deliver change:** *Selection, prioritization, implementation, agility*
    Design systems and processes for managing the portfolio, developing project implementation capabilities and aligning the organization.

Downside

Given the author's extensive and solid background of project management experience, it is difficult to be critical of any part of his book's content. If anything, I might suggest a little more emphasis on a couple of very difficult areas. For the first, one of the headlines reads: "**The benefits that the project is designed to deliver** – perhaps the most challenging element."[29] This is typical of rather loose language. In the case of a large majority of projects, they *do not deliver any benefits*, instead they *provide the means to benefits*, when their *products* are completed, accepted and activated. To put this more clearly, the project's personnel are not responsible for benefits – that is the responsibility of operations personnel.[30]

For the second instance, under the heading: "**Recognizing when you are no longer progressing**", it says:[31]

> "It is the responsibility of the project manager to ensure that a project meets, or exceeds, the expected quality. Any project for which the outcome becomes unfit for purpose needs to be cancelled."

These two statements are very typical of contractual legalese. Certainly any work produced must be up to some specified standard. However, exceeding the standard to any significant extent could result in unjustified expenditure. Cancelling a project, on the other hand, means literally throwing away all moneys spent so far, together with committed expenditures, to say nothing of facing the reactions of major stakeholders and their potential law suites. No one likes to abandon a project and be held responsible for doing so – certainly not at the project manager level.

Better by far is to find a way of repurposing the work to date so that it is not all a total loss.

Conclusion

This book makes for a valuable addition to your project management library. It covers a lot of ground that is not necessarily covered by traditional project management course material. It is particularly valuable for its advice to anyone who is involved in, or connected with, a large project, especially of the infrastructure type. In fact, it is good reading for anyone who is serious about project management.

In conclusion, author Antonio observes:[32]

"Increasing your awareness of projects and understanding the 10 Principles is not an easy journey. It takes time to reap the advantages, but it is definitely worth it. In fact, as we have seen, for many organizations having people who really understand projects is a matter of survival."

And:

"As an individual, you now have the tools to turn your ideas into a reality. Make sure you incorporate them into your daily routines. If you do, you'll certainly be more successful with your projects, both professionally and personal."

To the reader: It is well worth acquiring this book and introducing it to your teammates.

R. Max Wideman
Fellow, PMI

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[1] Leading Successful Projects, Antonio Nieto-Rodriguez, p xi
[2] Ibid, p ii
[3] Ibid, pages 17 to 21,
[4] Ibid, p66. The author suggests that "The clue should be in the name"!
[5] Ibid, p103
[6] Ibid, p35
[77] Ibid, p36
[8] Ibid, p48
[9] Ibid, p53
[10] Ibid, p102
[11] Ibid, p106
[12] Ibid, p xi
[13] Ibid, p xii
[14] Ibid, p4
[15] Ibid, p7
[16] Ibid, p8-9. There are typically a few more such as a "Legal Department", but the list is a good start.
[17] Ibid, p10-11
[18] Author Antonio might have added here that in the case of "human" resources, people with a different attitude, outlook and dedication are required.
[19] Ibid, p14-15
[20] And that includes most levels of government operations.
[21] Ibid, p25-26
[22] Ibid, p26
[23] Ibid, p27
[24] Ibid, p28
[25] Ibid, p29
[26] Ibid, p30
[27] Ibid, p31
[28] Ibid, p5-6

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[29] Ibid, p61

[30] Yes, I know that some people will argue that the delivery of actual benefits is included in their project mandate. If that is the case, then in my opinion that is a mistake in project design, because it means that there has to be included a significant change in management function once the capability has been created.

[31] Ibid, p84

[32] Ibid, p150