PMBOK® Guide, Third Edition – Is more really better?

A Review by R. Max Wideman – Part 2

In Part 1 of this review we took a general look at the Institute's latest *A Guide to the Project Management Body of Knowledge, Third Edition*, highlighting the good points but also drawing attention to some serious **Missed opportunities.** In this Part 2 of our review we look at Sections I and II of the Guide in more detail, examining both **What we liked** and the **Downside**.

Section I – The Project Management Framework

What we liked

In Chapter 1 it states:

> "Uniqueness is an important characteristic of project deliverables. For example, many thousands of office buildings have been developed, but each individual facility is unique – different owner, different design, different location, different contractors, and so on. The presence of repetitive elements does not change the fundamental uniqueness of the project work."[1]

Well almost. We would go further and argue that even if the buildings were otherwise identical, as in the case of standard homes in a housing estate development for example, each home could still be run as a project. Each would still be unique not by virtue of the deliverable itself but by virtue of its time, place and most likely its workforce. There is some confusion here between the "deliverable" as a "product", and the work that goes into creating the product. The work is transient but the product is permanent! We'll have more to say on this when we get to Section III, chapter 5.

> "The project manager should also examine the organizational culture and determine whether project management is recognized as a valid role with accountability and authority for managing the project"[2]

Good point, but what does s/he do upon discovering that it isn't?

Good lists of general management knowledge and interpersonal skills, potentially required by project team members, have been added to section 1.5.[3] Portfolios, portfolio management and project management office (PMO) get passing mention in sections 1.6 and 3.2.[4] However, the Guide makes it clear that it focuses on the case of a single project.[5] Still, the Guide provides a good list of some of the key features of a PMO.[6]

Chapter 2, Project Life Cycle and Organization, is an improvement over its 2000 predecessor. It explains that:

- "The project life cycle defines the phases that connect the beginning of a project to its end" and "The phases of a project are not the same as the Project Management Process Groups described in detail in Chapter 3."[7]
- "The transition from one phase to another . . . is usually defined by . . . some form of technical transfer or handoff."[8]
- The maturity of the organization with respect to its project management system, culture, style, organizational structure and project management office can also influence the project."[9]

It also illustrates that a project life cycle commences with an "Initial Phase" and ends with a "Final Phase".[10] This observation is not as inconsequential as it might seem, as we shall see later.

Downside

While the Guide's new sections on "project life cycle" are an improvement over the 2000 Guide, if any section deserved its own unique "Section", such as that accorded to the project management process groups, it is this one. As we said earlier, a well-formulated project life span, with appropriate "gates" between the major phases, is the vehicle for the sponsor or the executive management of the performing organization to exercise proper control over the whole project management process. Many project failures can be directly attributed to a lack of a sound PLS process. As one reviewer suggested "the Guide has become more systems-based [at the team level] and less executive oriented. I'm concerned that it reinforces bureaucracy over management and excellence of decision-making."

Also, the Guide suggests that many projects take place in a single phase. Every knowledge area chapter states categorically in a standard paragraph: "Each process [of the knowledge area] occurs at least once in every project and occurs in one or more project phases, ***if the project is divided into phases***."[11] (Emphasis added). Does this suggest a very limited view of project management, perhaps an obsolete one that real projects only exist once they get to "execution"? If so, this overlooks the importance of project management from the perspective of corporate management, to say nothing of the importance these days of project portfolio management. As one reviewer observed "The whole area of justifying, optimizing and initiating a project and its overall management and team are inferable as largely somebody else's job."

Probably for the same reason, the Guide fails to mention the "Business Case", which should be corporate management's justification to proceed to a "Concept Phase" where an idea can be developed with broad parameters for proceeding to definition and planning. The guide does discuss the "Project Charter", defined as a document issued to formally recognize the existence of a project and authorize the use of resources.[12] However, this document when presented in considerable detail is more appropriately applied to the release of the project for its execution phases.

Failure to recognize these natural and logical steps in the PLS is another reason for frequent project failure, or at least under-performance, in terms of maximizing ***product*** benefits. There are, alas, many instances where the project management was exemplary but the product was, nevertheless, an abject failure.

In passing, in the Organizational Structure section of Chapter 2, the chart titled "Organizational Structure Influences on Projects"[13], which has been around for many years, has been significantly revised. It was probably a good idea to remove the old percentages shown against "Percent of Performing Organization's Personnel Assigned Full Time to Project Work".[14] But this row has been relabeled "Resource Availability", and the row in the old chart labeled Common Titles for Project Manager's Role has been removed. The net result is that the chart no longer makes sense.

So, now in the functional column of the new chart we have the prospect of a project manager working part-time with little or no authority, no control over the project budget and little or no resource availability. But he or she does have part-time project management administrative staff. As a personal comment, as an aspiring project coordinator/leader in a functional organization under the old chart, I might well have been happy to work part-time on a project with support people. That is even though

virtually none of them worked full-time and I had little or no authority.[15]

However, under the new chart I don't think I would be at all happy about working as a project manager in the functional organization with little or no resource availability and little if any authority. It would be of little consequence whether I worked on the project part-time or full-time, I would be inclined to hand over the work to the part-time project administrative staff and let them get on with it.

Section II – The Standard for Project Management of a Project

This section consists of a single chapter, Chapter 3: Project Management Processes for a Project.

What we liked

The problem with this Section is that we could not find anything that we did like. Worse, the cover page is largely titled as "The Standard for Project Management of a Project". From this we must conclude that, as the official Institute standard, this section becomes the be-all and end-all of project management.

Downside

As we indicated earlier (under *Missed opportunities*) the problem starts with the labeling of the five project management process groups, a problem that first surfaced in the 1996 version of the Guide.[16] The groups in question are designated in order as *Initiating, Planning, Executing, Monitoring & Controlling,* and *Closing*. Monitoring and controlling project activities is a perfectly legitimate repetitive management activity no different from that of operational management.

Henri Fayol first described it in his classic description of management back in 1916.[17] He said "To manage is to forecast and plan, to organize, to command, to coordinate and to control." Except that the key element of forecasting is missing, this is not far from the Guide's own description: "General management encompasses planning, organizing, staffing, executing, and controlling the operations of an ongoing enterprise."[18]

The problem is that the Guide defines "Initiating (Processes)" as "Those processes performed to authorize and define the scope of a new phase or project . . ."[19] and "Those processes" included "Develop Project Charter" and "Develop Preliminary Project Scope Statement".[20] It defines "Closing (Processes)" as "Those processes performed to formally terminate all activities of a project or phase, and transfer the completed product to others . . ."[21] Consequently, these two labels and descriptions look exactly like the first and last phases of a complete project life span as illustrated in Figure 2-1 of the Guide.[22] So why wouldn't people jump to the conclusion that the Process Groups represent the project life span? Indeed, it has been taken to be exactly that, not just by many students, but also by many trainers and authors presenting the project management body of knowledge in their books and training programs.

However, the 2004 Guide does state categorically: "The Process Groups are not project phases."[23]

But then again it presents a diagram of data flow showing all five processes in a sequence that starts with "Human resources pool" as an initial input and "Final product, service, result" as the final output to the customer. [24] Clearly that spans the project life span so one might well presume that the steps in between are the equivalent of intermediate phases. That obviously reinforces the misconception that

these processes are the logical sequence in a project's life span and hence represents its phases rather than management's controlling process groups. The fact that there are also arrows going in all directions up the sides and a "Note" that says "Not all interactions and data flow among the Process Groups are shown" hardly clarifies this misconception. Indeed, there are a number of other places in the Guide where this misconception is reinforced.[25]

The above diagram is preceded by an interesting graphic that tries to display the cyclic nature of the intent and its correspondence with Deming's Plan-Do-Check-Act quality management cycle.[26] If the Guide's descriptions are to be taken as presented, then one concludes that initiating and closing are a part of every cycle. Indeed, this is formally recognized in the bottom row of an illustration entitled "Project Management Process Group Triangle.[27] We question whether this really makes sense in practical project management?

A further illustration attempts to put the process groups into perspective relative to the "Project Boundaries".[28] This shows Project Inputs at the project's beginning timeline boundary, the planning and executing processes cycling in the middle, and the closing boundary at the project's ending timeline boundary. What could be clearer than that to demonstrate that "Initiating" and "Closing" are synonymous with the first and last phases of the project life span?

True that the Guide is careful to point out:

> "This does not mean that the knowledge, skills and processes described should always be applied uniformly on all projects. The project manager, in collaboration with the project team, is always responsible for determining what processes are appropriate, and the appropriate degree of rigor for each process, for any given project."[29]

However, the unfortunate reality is that general management, upon seeing this promoted by PMI as ***the*** "Standard for Project Management of a Project", will insist upon it being standard for ***every*** project. This when we think the real question should be: "Should it be applied like this on ***any*** project?"

In any case, it is questionable whether the selection of processes and degree of rigor should be left to the project manager and the project team. This flies in the face of the requirements of project portfolio management, where a degree of uniformity across projects is essential for the proper selection and supervision of projects in a portfolio.

The bottom line of all of this is that the primary focus of corporate management, and their portfolio and program managers, should be on the careful design of the project life span as the overarching external control vehicle. And the Institute should adopt Deming's much simpler plan-do-check-act labels for the proper and legitimate internal project management monitor-and-control cycle.

An aside

In any philosophical discussion of how to manage a project it is important to draw a distinction between managing the project management components and managing the technology of the project. We believe that it is possible to articulate "knowledge and practices" that "are applicable to most projects, most of the time"[30] provided that these "knowledge and practices" are limited to the project management subject domain. The observation is not true, however, in the domain of technology management where the management of the technology is very different from area of application to area of application, and industry to industry.

One may view project technology complexity on a scale from traditional to high-tech, say, from construction to research and development. In construction it is good practice to plan from end to end. At the high-tech end it is good strategy to proceed through a series of iterations of which there may be several within a phase, or a single iteration may represent a complete phase. Since IT tends to be near the high-tech end, it is quite appropriate to approach the management of this technology in a whole series of iterations, each adding an increment of functionality.

But even in construction the concept of "iteration" is not unknown, except that it is called a mock-up, prototype or test section for the purpose of validating and verifying design details. Nevertheless, we think it quite possible that, in the 2004 Guide, the appropriate approach to IT management in particular is being inappropriately applied to project management in general.

To be continued

In Part 3 of this review we will look in more detail at Section III of the Guide.

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[1] Ibid p5
[2] Ibid p14
[3] Ibid 15
[4] Ibid pp 16,17 & 45
[5] Ibid p4
[6] Ibid p18
[7] Ibid p19
[8] Ibid p20
[9] Ibid p27
[10] Ibid, Figure 2-1, p21
[11] Ibid pp103, 123, 157,179, 200, 221, 237, 270
[12] Ibid p368
[13] Ibid p28
[14] *A Guide to the Project Management Body of Knowledge*, 2000 Edition, Project Management Institute, PA, 2000, p19
[15] Ibid – see column titled "Functional"
[16] *A Guide to the Project Management Body of Knowledge*, Project Management Institute, PA, 1996, p28
[17] Fayol, H., Administration Industrielle et Generale, 1916
[18] *A Guide to the Project Management Body of Knowledge*, Third Edition, Project Management Institute, PA, 2004, p15
[19] Ibid p362
[20] Ibid Figure 3-6, p44
[21] Ibid p354
[22] Ibid Figure 2-1, p21
[23] Ibid p41
[24] Ibid, Figure 3-4, p42
[25] Ibid, see Figure 3-5 on p43 and Figure 4-2 on p80 as examples

[26] Ibid, Figure 3-2, p40 and Figure 3-1, p39
[27] Ibid p69
[28] Ibid, Figure 3-5, p43
[29] Ibid p37
[30] Ibid pvii