

# PM Outlook

For the Project Management Community

Issue 12

July 1993

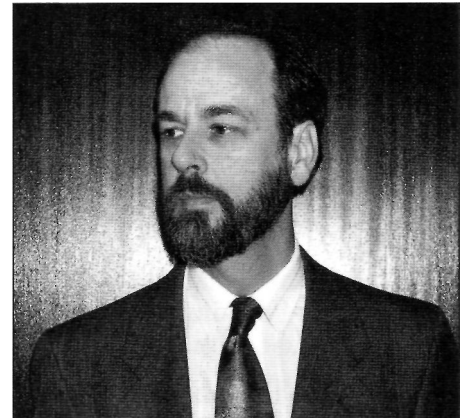
## Clients and Other Abstractions

**M**any of the procedures and process we apply to project management activities are a cost of failure. They are invented, developed, replicated and subdivided in ever increasing detail and variety, usually by people suffering from that heart-rending organisational ailment: responsibility without power. Individuals, groups and departments are set up, diverting scarce resources away from productive work, to find ways of patching over failures in basically simple processes. The result is often a mass of complex procedures and rules which people with real work to do either ignore or, worse, obey to the detriment of their true objectives. Effort is channelled into complying with the procedures instead of into achieving valuable organisational goals.

There are many possible reasons why this happens. In the project world an underlying cause of proceduritis (morbid inflammation and swelling of the procedures) is the unease that the functional structures of the company feel about projects and project management. This is understandable; projects are by definition departures from business as usual, distractions from the operational workload and, even worse, often managed by people who think their task is more important/urgent/significant than all that day-to-day work. The functional structures respond to this unease as predictably as the oyster responds to the grain of sand - they surround the irritation with layers of soothing regulation. Do not, however, imagine that the end result will be a pearl.

These reactive responses often take the form of third-party interference in the project, demands for information about progress and lengthy reports in strictly predefined formats. The information supplied is rarely used, except in retrospect to attack the project manager for supposed failures, and it seldom contributes to a successful, or even appropriate, project outcome.

Fortunately, the project management methodology allegedly adopted by most of the company provides a means



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of meeting both project and functional management needs. This simple but immensely powerful device ensures that projects only get off the ground if they look likely to be cost-effective, to meet or contribute to business objectives, have a high priority and a defensibly reasonable chance of success. The same device ensures that projects selected as worth implementing are adequately resourced and supported, and takes care of monitoring their progress, checking always that up to the minute circumstances still make it desirable and feasible to continue with the project. With a powerful cybernetic instrument like that in place, the collective mind of the functional organisation can be set at rest; there will be no further need to surround projects and project managers

## Clients and Other Abstractions — continued

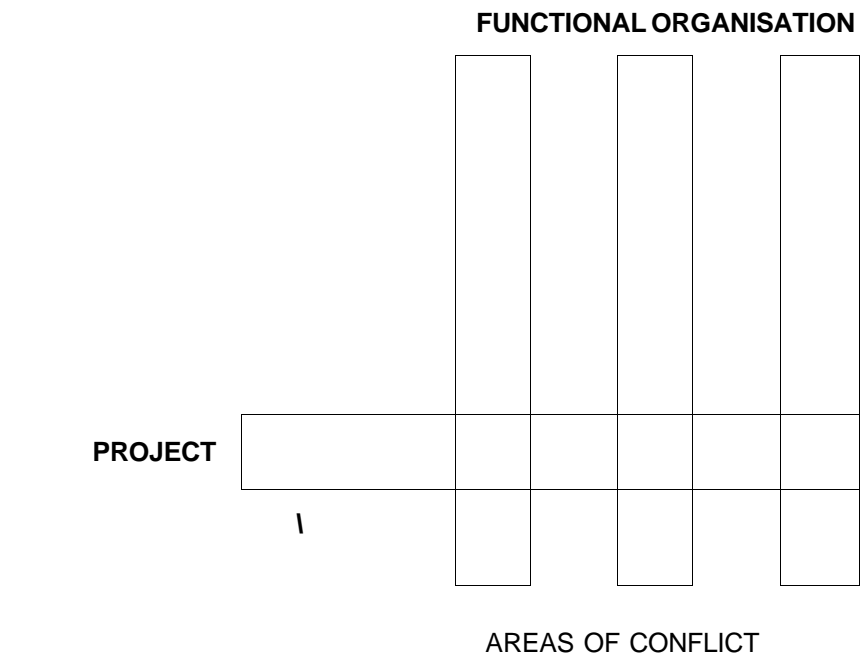
with detailed procedures and processes designed to stop them getting out of hand. In fact, the flexibility and decision-making operations of the control device mean that only the most basic of rules ever need to be defined - the device is pre-programmed to take care of the company's interests whatever that may mean in the specific circumstances that apply to *this* project at *this* time.

How many readers recognise this device? Look in the PMH and you'll find it described in detail. It's a Client. If you've never seen one in real life then ask around (there are a few examples about but the market has been infiltrated with imitations which carry the same label but don't have the functionality). The reward for finding a genuine working model could be quite surprising. What, then, are the functions of a project client? Paraphrasing the PMH they seem to fall into three categories:

- to identify the business objective the project will achieve or serve;
- to champion the project, winning support and resources (including money) and making the company aware of the needs and benefits of the project;
- to exercise control over the project, approving project objectives and deliverables, reviewing progress, checking that adequate and practical plans exist for remaining work and constantly reviewing the continued desirability of the project

Implicit in these functions is a role in clearing lines for the project manager and making it possible for him/her to do the job. This is a vital role because one of the biggest obstacles to successful project implementation is the conflict between the demands of the project and those of business as usual, especially as it affects contractors from the functional organisation. This is a feature of all matrix situations, illustrated above.

In any conflict of priorities, the contractor is faced with a decision: on



the one hand he or she has the pressure from the functional line, which holds the power over salary, bonus, promotion prospects and an agreeable working life in general, and on the other hand there is the project, which holds the power over.....You may think this is not likely to be a very hard decision to make. In a matrix management situation the job of senior management, (both horizontal and vertical in the diagram) is to reduce or eliminate the conflict experienced by the contractor, who is probably not paid to solve ethical dilemmas but to get on with a job. Unfortunately senior managers are no more immune to political agendas and the imperatives of their own personal objectives than anyone else. This is probably why genuine working examples of true matrix management are about as common as the Tasmanian tiger (believed to exist but never actually spotted).

Convincing the functional lines that their precious resources should be allowed to commit to input to a project, and that having committed they should be allowed to meet their commitments, is one role of the project client that would revolutionise project management in the company, if it were to be generally adopted.

One serious obstacle to successful clienting is the yawning gap between the organisational placing of someone who is senior enough to champion a project in all the senses described above, and someone who is accessible enough to the project manager and project team to perform hands on control and advisory functions. Delegating some of the role to a "client's representative" can be a partial answer to this (never forgetting that delegation does not absolve the delegator from responsibility).

No one in the company will be unaware of the ever-increasing pressure to do more with less. This affects those senior managers who are potential project clients as much as anyone and their workloads make it very hard for them voluntarily to take on extra responsibilities. The efficiency and effectiveness of our project management are seriously reduced, though, by failure to utilise the client role to the full. One good client equals many third-party checkers-up and procedure-devisers. Overall the cost would be worth it.

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