...Gang Aft Agley

It sometimes happens, when I first become involved with a project team, that I need to ask a really fundamental question: "What is it that you're trying to achieve?" The first few times I asked this I was surprised by the reaction, which could be uncomprehending, perhaps resentful, and sometimes downright hostile. I still ask the question but the reactions don't surprise me any more (and maybe I've got more tactful in my old age).

Whatever the tone of the interaction, the answer is usually to tell me what the team is doing. What I want to know is why they're doing it. More to the point, I want to assure myself that they all know why they're doing it.

This reminds me of an incident, possibly quite irrelevant to this article, when I was asked to organise a team-building event for a group of people who all reported to the same boss. It became clear very early in the discussion that this was the only thing they had in common. So, I asked my prospective client "why do you think they should be a team?" Shortly afterwards we both realised that I probably wasn't the right consultant for his needs. I still think it was a relevant and important question because you really do have to know why you want to do something before you can sensibly plan how to achieve it.

It's all too easy to fall into an approach to planning which dives straight into the activity, while neglecting the concepts. No doubt someone, somewhere, has formulated an idea of what the project is actually for, but the message has been conveyed to the team only in a very perfunctory way.

The team, full of enthusiasm, begins by listing all the tasks and activities it thinks are required and then disperses to carry them out. We've been brought up this way and brownie points are often to be earned through visibly frenetic activity. There was a very pertinent article in *Project Manager Today* a little while ago, which contained the immortal line:

"They wanted to see some progress and it was very tempting to do something, anything, just to keep them happy".

They, in this case, were Kuwaiti government officials but I suspect that project teams might perceive similar expectations on the part of British managers Even if this perception is actually wrong, it will still prompt the behaviour in the team that show up as physical rather than cerebral activity.

Planning, and project planning in particular, is something that has to be done backwards. It must start with a vision of how the "owner" of the project (Client, Champion, or whatever the role is called in your organisation) wants things to be. More prosaically, you could reduce your vision of a future golden age to a list of business benefits, though personally I think a bit of poetry does no-one any harm.

Once you know where you want to get to, some project objectives, ie, things you'd need to achieve in order to be there, can be defined. This leads on to a set of project deliverables that would be required to achieve those objectives, which in turn enables you to define the work (packages) that would have to be done in order to deliver those deliverables, and round up some people and resources to do the work. Then you'd be able to identify the milestones that would enable you to check your progress along the way.

Only then will you be at the point where you can start implementation.

All this is fairly straightforward, if a little counter-cultural in some organisations. However, planning is a messy, contradictory pursuit and pitfalls lie ahead. You might very well go along with the military dictum that time spent in reconnaissance is seldom wasted.

What's hard to convey to others, it may even be hard to accept it ourselves, is that planning *at most* deals with intentions. Built into any plan are sets of assumptions about how the world will be as you move through time. These are inevitably founded in how you see the world now, together with how you think the world ought to be. The technical term for this "world view" which colours our perceptions of everything is Weltanschauung (with two u's).
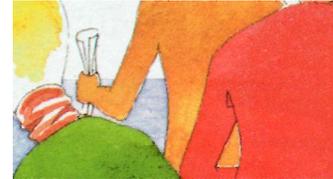
Now the snag is that it is actually impossible to know how the world will be tomorrow, next week or next year. In fact, there is an infinite number of factors in the way the world is right now that we don't and can't know. The potential complexity of the interactions between these unknowns is so great, that planning based upon a fixed view of the world one week, one month or one year in the future is almost certain to be erroneous. The extent to which this will actually matter in a practical sense is, by definition, unpredictable. What is certain is that, as F E Huse[1] put it:

... the performance of the whole is not the sum of the individual parts, but a consequence of the relationship of the performance between the parts. Thus the problems cannot be solved separately, since they are interdependent.

Paradoxically, the degree of uncertainty increases, the further away from your "vision" you are. The vision, or list of business benefits, is the least volatile. You will probably still want to be more efficient, shorten time to market, increase profitability, or whatever, even if the world changes quite radically around you.

The project objectives, which might turn your vision into reality, are much more susceptible to a changing environment. Project deliverables, to realise those objectives, are even more so. The work that has to be done and the resources of all kinds needed to do it are the most susceptible of all. Counter-balancing this is the increasing level of uncertainty which goes with the passage of time. So wherever you look at the project you find unpredictability, change, complexity and uncertainty, and you need to be prepared to deal with it.

Having created an atmosphere of despair by introducing both chaos theory and systems theory (Zen and the art of project management?) into the humdrum business of project planning, I feel a certain responsibility to boost morale. One of the saving graces of current chaos thinking is that the unpredictability of events is bounded. We may not be able to say what will happen but we can at least make assumptions about what will not happen and thus put limits on the possibilities.

Likewise, the inter-connectedness of all things seems an intimidating concept; and must be antagonistic to the reductionist principles that we usually apply to project planning: work and organisation breakdown structures, programme — project —• work-package hierarchies, etc..

However, in practical terms it probably means no more than developing a heightened awareness of the inputs and outputs of the work packages we define, and of the drivers and dependencies that apply to our programmes, projects and work packages. Thus, cultivating an ability to respond to changing needs.

What we must avoid is that view of plans that says: "once it's down on paper it's fixed and any departure from it constitutes a failure". This doesn't only apply to project plans of course. It's probably even more important for strategic or business planning.

What all this uncovers is a burning need to move towards what I call "soft planning". Traditional planning seeks to capture all the things that have to be done and fix them in time by some kind of methodology—hopefully a rational one like cpa but all too often an irrational one such as "I'll set them a demanding target to keep them on their toes and make me look dynamic." Subsequently progress is monitored in terms of "completion" of the activities shown on the plan. Contingency planning for risks or changes, if it's done at all, is bolted onto the side of the plan as an afterthought.

Soft planning, on the other hand, is full of qualifications, exceptions and open-ended possibilities. It is, in fact, mainly contingency planning; preparing to take account of the range of possibilities within the "bounded chaos" of the project's environment.

Of course, the project is being undertaken for a specific purpose and this purpose, or vision, defines the destination towards which the team tries to move. An initial route is mapped out and milestones are identified.

After this the journey from conception to completion is one of discovery and learning, of continual adaptation to the changing circumstances within which the project exists and also of continual review of the overall objectives. After all, if the world is constantly changing then the desirability, let alone the feasibility, of the project's original vision and objectives must be subject to question.

This puts a new set of demands on project teams and defines new criteria for assessing their performance. We've all seen politicians accused of U-turns because their latest policies are different to the ones they publicly espoused earlier. In a sane world we would applaud a statesman who was able to identify and adapt to changing circumstances. The same applies to managers of all kinds, including project managers.

The concept of "organisational health" 'an ability to respond to unexpected demands' which underlies soft planning and many of the other ideas in this article, may need selling to line managers, clients and other influential people when applied to project management. Wouldn't we, and our companies, all be better off if it became the accepted "way we do things round here"?

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He is currently working on a PhD research programme, investigating the relationships between project managers' perceptions of threat and project performance.