

More on the Definition of "Project" and a final conclusion

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Introduction

Last month we spent considerable effort in trying to come up with a more comprehensive definition of the term "Project" – especially in the context of project management as a professional discipline. So far we have not succeeded. But why is it so important anyway? In short, why bother? To answer that question, it is timely to remind readers of Dr. Lynda Bourne's opening remarks quoted from her blog, titled: *Seeking a definition of a project*. In it she says in part:¹

"The simple fact is [that] if you cannot define something precisely, you have real problems explaining what it is, what it does and the value it offers. ... Definitions serve two interlinked purposes, they describe the subject of the definition in sufficient detail to allow the concept to be recognized and understood and they exclude similar 'concepts' that do not fit the definition. Definitions do not explain the subject, [they] merely define it."

On the issue of precise definition, Lynda observes that: "Good definitions are short and unambiguous and are essential for almost every aspect of life." And cites the example of ordering a snack requires a clear understanding of what's required. How many times have you been to a restaurant with a friend and ordered a meal but when it arrives, it doesn't look as good as what your friend ordered – largely because that's not what you asked for? Or maybe your idea of what a hamburger should look like is not the same as the restaurant's interpretation. You get what they think you ordered.

However, if you are at a friend's home for the meal, assuming you are polite, you will happily accept what ever comes. You are still having a meal, but the difference is in the environment in which you are eating. It's the same with definitions – many are situation specific and need tailoring to the circumstances. That's what the art of definitions is all about. What we are saying is that it is not realistic to think that all or most, except the simplest definitions, can be so devised as to suit every situation.

But let's change gears for a moment. Readers may have noticed that in our last paper, we did not explore what definitions of the word "project" are offered in the general public domain.

Definitions of "project" in the public domain

Here are some samples of the definition of the word "project" in the general public domain. A project is:

- A systematic arrangement proposed for producing something. (Paraphrased) *The Concise Oxford Dictionary*.
- An individual or collaborative enterprise that is carefully planned and designed to achieve a particular aim. *Google*
- A piece of planned work or an activity that is finished over a period of time and intended to achieve a particular purpose. *On line English Dictionary*
- An individual or collaborative enterprise that is carefully planned to achieve a particular aim. *Oxford dictionary*
- A planned piece of work that has a particular aim. *MacMillan Dictionary*

Common to all of these definitions is the idea of having a plan and the idea of having an aim, purpose or at least something as a result. But is that so different from general management you may ask? And the

answer to that is, well, not really! In other words, in the public domain you can use any of these definitions, but in the context of project management, they are just not very helpful!

So why don't we look at the comparison of "project" with general management from the general management perspective? To go there, we first need to understand what we mean by "general management". Since people involved in projects come and go, people in general management like to think of themselves as being in "Business as Usual" (BaU) on a more permanent basis. That's assuming that there are no mergers or downsizings in the offing!

So what is BaU? Here we like to quote our favorite source: Henri Fayol.² He said simply:

"To manage is to forecast and to plan, to organize, to command, to co-ordinate and to control."

Note that Fayol was referring to maintaining the life of a business organization indefinitely, while a project is typically a one-shot deal! To project management people, Fayol's definition looks very much like the Project Management Institute's five Processes groups of Initiating, Planning, Executing, Monitoring and Controlling, and Closing. And indeed they are, except that in BaU they represent a state of continuity, while in a project they represent the varying management of the work in the successive phases and stages in the project's life span. That management sequence gets repeated through to the project's ultimate completion and extinction (closure).

That makes a tremendous difference in how the two are perceived, organized and conducted. It also makes a difference in the attitudes towards the work involved in each case. As we've often said: in the case of a project the attitude is to get the work done once and for all. Indeed, implied but not necessarily stated specifically is that both the "plan" and "delivery" of something that results from a project is distinctive, one time only, even "unique", as in "one off". In the case of BaU, the objective is to keep the organization (work) going for as long as possible. While we, project managers that is, may understand this intuitively, the explanation is not sufficiently explicit to convey the difference to people at large.

So let's take another look from the business perspective. BaU people like to refer to Fayol's six-element dictum as a "Business Process". So what is the definition of a "Business Process"?

Business Process³

Here are several classic definitions of "Business Process". These definitions are instructive for the insights that each contain:

1. Davenport (1993)[5] defines a (business) process as:

"A structured, measured set of activities designed to produce a specific output for a particular customer or market. It implies a strong emphasis on how work is done within an organization, in contrast to a product focus's emphasis on what. A process is thus a specific ordering of work activities across time and space, with a beginning and an end, and clearly defined inputs and outputs: a structure for action. ... Taking a process approach implies adopting the customer's point of view. Processes are the structure by which an organization does what is necessary to produce value for its customers."

2. Hammer & Champy's (1993)[6] definition can be considered as a subset of Davenport's. They define a process as:

"A collection of activities that takes one or more kinds of input and creates an output that is of value to the customer."

3. Rummler & Brache (1995)[7] use a definition that clearly encompasses a focus on the organization's external customers, when stating that

"A business process is a series of steps designed to produce a product or service. Most processes (...) are cross-functional, spanning the 'white space' between the boxes on the organization chart. Some processes result in a product or service that is received by an organization's external customer. We call these primary processes. Other processes produce products that are invisible to the external customer but essential to the effective management of the business. We call these support processes."

4. Johansson et al. (1993) define a process as:

"A set of linked activities that take an input and transform it to create an output. Ideally, the transformation that occurs in the process should add value to the input and create an output that is more useful and effective to the recipient either upstream or downstream."

As the Wikipedia article goes on to observe, by summarizing the four definitions above, we can compile the following list of characteristics for a "**Business Process**" as follows:⁴

- 1 **Definability:** It must have clearly defined boundaries, input and output.
- 2 **Order:** It must consist of activities that are ordered according to their position in time and space (a sequence).
- 3 **Customer:** There must be a recipient of the process' outcome, a customer.
- 4 **Value-adding:** The transformation taking place within the process must add value to the recipient, either upstream or downstream.
- 5 **Embeddedness:** A process cannot exist in itself. It must be embedded in an organizational structure.
- 6 **Cross-functionality:** A process regularly can, but not necessarily must, span several functions.

The Wikipedia article also adds:⁵

"Frequently, identifying a process owner (i.e., the person responsible for the continuous improvement of the process) is considered as a prerequisite. Sometimes the process owner is the same person who is performing the process."

Wikipedia goes on to offer its own definition as follows:

"A business process or business method is a collection of related, structured activities or tasks that produce a specific service or product (serve a particular goal) for a particular customer or customers. It may often be visualized as a flowchart of a sequence of activities with interleaving decision points or as a Process Matrix of a sequence of activities with relevance rules based on data in the process."

All of this is very instructive because, aside from item 6 in the 6-point list above, the aspirations and activities of both BaU and project are very similar. Hence we may assert that for all intents and purposes:

A Project is a Distinct Process

And, in trying to define the term "project" as being distinct from BaU, in any definition of the term "project", the first five items in the foregoing list should be *avoided*. We can simply refer to the

collection as a "distinct process". But again, what is the need for such precision?

The need for a specific definition of "Project"

Let us remind the reader again of Dr. Bourne's observation earlier:

"...If you cannot define something precisely, you have real problems explaining what it is..."

In the previous section we found that for all intents and purposes, a project is essentially a process. Further, we found that a "Process" has six key characteristics, of which one is "Embeddedness". That is "A process cannot exist in itself. It must be embedded in an organizational structure". So, it is not difficult to conclude that more frequently than not, a Project also only exists when embedded in an organizational structure.

But why do so many project managers feel that there is a need for a more specific definition of "project"?

Now, we think it is fair to say that in the last several decades, with the advent of computerization, the majority of projects, in number if not in value, have been in the Information Technology and Administration sectors. And this field is still growing fast. In this dynamic situation, there is an increasing number of new and existing employed people who not only need to know what a project is, but also understand its strengths and limitations. Hence the urgent need for a sound definition of "Project" from which we can then go on to develop a correspondingly short and unambiguous definition of "Project Management".

Some people may say: "So what is the big deal? If they are comfortable working in BaU, why can they not be comfortable working on a project?" The fact is, so far as the work is concerned, the two are quite different. Indeed, this is probably the one thing, together with its consequences, that distinguishes a Project from BaU. It is not unusual for BaU people, who are much more comfortable with working in an environment of on-going Business Processes, to look askance on project management work with its unfamiliar rigors expected of them by their project managers.

So the BaU and project working environments tend to be quite different. For one thing, a BaU organization is typically set up into departments of expertise, such as purchasing, accounting, production, human resources, legal, and so on. When there is a steady flow of work coming in, it is much more effective and efficient for departments of trained people to handle this type of workload. Such work can generally be handled at a steady rate, with occasional bouts of overtime, and delivery dates are not an issue (until the customers complain too loudly!)

Under this kind of arrangement, if a project comes along, one department may start the project work and then hand it off to the next department. That department will then take it into their priority work stream according to the priorities of other work they may have, and where departmental work often takes priority over project work! Moreover, each department only takes responsibility for the work they do and not for the project as a whole. This arrangement has given rise to the nickname: "Stovepipe mentality" where work is "handed over the wall" from one department to the next, long lines of communication can exist, along with a culture of suspicion, or a dictatorial management style.⁶

For example, in building a house you would not expect the bricklayers to dig the foundations or, for that matter, expect the trench diggers to lay the bricks. That's why in practice, you call up the brick laying team when they are needed, and hope to get to the top of their priority list as soon as possible. That's not the fastest way of doing the project, but it is the best way of building a house.

The broad objective of managing such a project, i.e. project management, is to gain the benefit of both worlds – which is why we need to be quite clear on what a project is.

What have we learned from our efforts to dissect "project"?⁷

We have learned that:

- Projects do not exist in nature. They exist only as "artificial constructs" within the confines of some organizational structure that has decided to assign a segment of work intended to deliver some specified outcome. This "project" approach is adopted because it has "proved its worth". The essence of a project is its team-of-skills approach. However, a single person with the necessary skills can conduct a project on his or her own.
- In technical terms, the word "project" is not as simple as it appears. A project is essentially a process that is typically constrained by limited resources, time and money, and a sophisticated project can be extremely complex. In its very basic form, a project consists of a "planning" process followed by a "doing" process, known as implementation or execution.
- It has a start that is sometimes difficult to identify, or is set arbitrarily, but the finish is determined by the successful delivery of the required deliverable, i.e. the delivery of some outcome, product, service or result of benefit to the project's sponsors. However, this delivery must also include any subsequent delivery obligations together with the completion of all administrative work, such as closing of accounts and so on. Note, however, that if at the end the customer is not satisfied, the project can hardly be said to be "successful".
- Not all projects represent the endgame. They can be "enablers" providing a vehicle for a subsequent project to create the final end product of value. This is typical of "Program" management for example. The exact sequence of activities in the project process, especially at the corporate control level, (in other words, the project's life span,) depends largely on the "Area of Project Management Application" e.g., construction, administration, Information Technology, healthcare, and so on.
- Because of the "newness" of the required deliverable, the project is subject to uncertainty, which may be a risk, but can also be an opportunity, and often both. Much of this "risk" could arise from poor management. However, the risk is more likely to be in the product's technology, the environment in which the project is undertaken, the environment in which the product is expected to perform, and the use to which the product is actually put.
- Ideally, a project should be launched on the basis of a justifying Business Case. That is, a Business Case that sets the direction, the expectations, and the ultimate measures of success. Of course, a project may be stopped before completion, i.e. abandoned for some good reason, but that does not stop anyone from referring to it as a "project".
- However, almost all of the foregoing descriptions are included in the essential understanding of "process".

Our final "Project" definition

For the purposes of *distinguishing* between "Project" and "BaU" according to our present understanding of both Project Management and BaU, we may say that a Project is:

A distinct process in which a group of people, who between them have the necessary skills and who act together as a team, work to produce a preconceived unique deliverable of added value, and take collective responsibility for the success of the outcome.

Note that the use here of the term "distinct process", includes all the characteristics of the term "process" described earlier. It is also conceivable that this definition can include a single individual, provided this individual has all the skills required and takes responsibility for the outcome.

Note, however, this definition is particularly relevant where the "necessary skills" are, more often than not, divided across more than one corporate organizational department.

Of course, if you don't like this definition for some reason, you are always free to adopt your own, but don't expect your audience to fully understand without some clarification.

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¹ Mosaicproject's Blog: *Seeking a definition of a project*, posted on August 11, 2016 at <https://mosaicprojects.wordpress.com>

² For those who may not know, according to https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Henri_Fayol *Henri Fayol* (1841–1925) was a French mining engineer, mining executive, author and director of mines who developed a general theory of business administration. He and his colleagues developed this theory independently of scientific management but roughly contemporaneously. Like his contemporary, *Frederick Winslow Taylor*, he is widely acknowledged as a founder of modern management methods.

³ The following quotations are taken from Wikipedia at https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Business_process#Other_definitions

⁴ Ibid.

⁵ Ibid.

⁶ For more examples see [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Stovepipe_\(organisation\)](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Stovepipe_(organisation))

⁷ The source of the following remarks is the observations collected in our previous paper: *Defining the word project...* here: http://www.maxwideman.com/papers/defining_project/intro.htm