

Rev #1
Proactive Project Management
By Morten Fangel
(A book review by R. Max Wideman, FPPI)

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Introduction or abstract

This book, *Proactive Project Management*, by my good friend Morten Fangel in Denmark, is essentially about the body of knowledge of project management, its structure and practical reality in a world of "How to" rather than a "What is". To this end, Morten has subtitled his book: "How to make common sense common practice".¹ It is certainly refreshing to come across a book that is about the Body of Knowledge of Project Management, yet takes a thoroughly realistic approach to its application based on years of practical experience.

Morten explains his approach by observing:

"The concept of proactive management has often been expressed as '*well begun is half completed*'. Being proactive is both common sense and universally accepted . . . To plan before execution; to see potential risks before they occur; to focus on the whole rather than single parts."²

Then Morten hastens to add that:

"But many examples from practice show that being proactive in this way is *not at all natural*."³

Morten goes on to justify this observation by arguing:

When a project or a new phase is initiated, attention is spontaneously focused on the project content. This is the natural reaction when we start a new task.⁴

- From the start, and for as long as possible in the process, we focus on the project execution, i.e., the solution of the project itself.
- Attention given to management aspects is used reactively when challenges threaten the progress of the project.⁵

There are many good reasons for this pattern:

- We are stressed for time.
- Uncertainty around the project is too great.
- Management of the project can be a rather diffuse experience – for many participants, it is much more satisfying to discuss the content.

In short, Morten asserts that:

"[This] pattern could be seen as a natural law for projects – almost like the power of gravity."⁶

None of this should come as a surprise. We have long held that the starting point for brainstorming a new project is to simply start with a listing of the most obvious things to be done. Indeed, we said on the topic of project Objectives and Outputs:⁷

" Normally, if you follow textbook theory, you state your objectives first and then talk about all the work that has to be done to achieve those objectives. However, most of the

time it is difficult to get a clear idea of the objectives (outputs or 'deliverables') to start with, and time is wasted just arriving at a definition of what is to be accomplished.

In any case, people find it easier to "work the problem" by thinking of all the things that have to be done, and get that off their chest, so to speak. Typically, everyone can think of pieces or parts of the work that need to be done. This gets people warmed up, and you can then arrive more quickly at a much better definition of the project's objectives. That's why *it helps to talk about work items first.*" (Emphasis added.)

Nevertheless, as Morten sees it, it is a kind of natural law that we immerse ourselves in the execution of the project first; with the consequence that project management then takes place re-actively. That is, after the problems have already occurred during the project's execution. The aim of Morten's book is to shift this attitude away from being reactive to being proactive.

About the author

Morten Fangel is Managing Director & Chief Consultant at Fangel Consulting Ltd., a company he founded in the Copenhagen Area of Denmark. The company is dedicated to management consulting and education. Morten is an Honorary Fellow of the International Project Management Association (IPMA) of which he has been a President and Chair and has been featured in IPMA's Thought Leaders section. He is also an honorary member of the Icelandic Project Management Association for his work as co-founder and supporter of that association.

Book Structure

The contents of the book are set out in 14 chapters as shown below, but the relationships of these chapters are somewhat complex, so the author has resorted to a color coding that will be explained shortly.

1. How to use the book
2. Projects and project management
3. Leading project management
4. Facilitate the management activities
5. Project preparation
6. Project analyses
7. Master project planning
8. Project anchoring
9. Project start-up
10. Detailed project planning
11. Manage project execution
12. Ongoing project leadership
13. Stepwise project follow-up
14. Project close-out

These chapters are intended to provide a coherent set of principles, methods, and practical hints that can help you to be more proactive when managing your project. Proactive management implies that the management effort takes place before the management challenge arises!⁸ To perform good project management implies practicing three different areas of competency:⁹

1. Application of experience
2. Application of methods, and
3. Application of leadership behavior

Of these three, it is from the perspective of Application of methods that provides the basis for the concept of the book.¹⁰

The foregoing list of chapters may be more particularly described as follows:¹¹

- The first three chapters present the basis for planning and evaluating project management – at all stages of the project process, while chapter 4 deals initially with different ways for performing the management roles in a project, and when to apply these roles.
- Chapters 5 through 8 cover the issues of project preparation/initiation and related activities such as project analysis, master planning and anchoring.
- Chapters 9 through 12 respectively deal with how to organize a suitable project start-up and perform the detailed planning; how to organize the management of project execution; and how to deal with the challenges of ongoing leadership such as how to maintain participant's attention, or how to perform meetings efficiently, and how to develop participants' competencies.
- Chapter 13 addresses a classic part of project management, namely the conduct of a step-by-step follow-up of the progress of the project's execution within the agreed plans as well as to clarify any need for new management initiatives.
- Chapter 14 covers the final phase of project close out with particular attention to doing it in such a way that the participants and partners in the project become even more competent and motivated to enter into future projects.

However, to help get an overview of the book, different color groupings are used as follows. The introductory, cross sectional chapters 1 to 4 and the book's appendices are flagged with the mixed color grey. The other chapters follow the color spectrum with red flagging representing the project management phases for chapters 5, 9, 11 and 14, and blue for the follow-on management work described in chapters 12 and 13. Chapter 6, Project analyses, is flagged by yellow. If that explanation takes some effort to swallow, then the book is probably reflective of the real complexity of project management in practice.

Chapter 8, "Project anchoring", probably requires more explanation especially for western readers who are more familiar with the term "stakeholder management" rather than this term. In this book, project anchoring is defined as:¹²

"The anchoring of the project process in order to ensure that the project is completed with a relevant result and has the necessary resources allocated. Project anchoring is considered an essential management task."

This 7"x10" hardcover book contains 456 well-packed pages many of which are printed in color for added impact. It is well illustrated throughout with charts, flow diagrams, and tables. The book concludes with two foldouts for easy reference, the first illustrates the Fangel Project Management Model, and the second elaborates on the model by cross tabulating tools relevant to both the six project phases and seven management activities.

What we liked

We really liked the overall framework of Morten Fangel's Proactive Project Management. Other popular frameworks tend to focus on a series of project management functional components. In contrast, the *Fangel Project Management Model* consists of a matrix formed by a set of sequential Management *Phases* answering the question "When" on the one hand, and a set of Proactive Project Management *activities* answering the question "How" on the other.

As Morten sees it, the set of Management phases, corresponding to a project's natural life span, encompasses six phases as follows: Project preparation; Project start-up; Manage project execution 1; Project evaluation; Manage project execution 2; and Project close-out. The Proactive Project Management set consists of seven main activities: Leading project management; Project analysis; Master project planning; Project anchoring; Detailed project planning; Ongoing project leadership; and Stepwise project follow-up. These two sets are shown graphically in Figure 1.



Figure 1: Phases and activities in the Project Management Model
 (the white numbers refer to chapters in the book)

As described in our next section, we have difficulty with the three management phases marked "11". However, this is evidently an attempt to introduce the concept of "iteration" that may or may not be appropriate to the project in question. However, if these three phases are grouped together as a subset under the general heading of "Execution", then we are back to the classic four-phase project life span — of which we strongly approve.

Downside

Note that in Figure 1 presented earlier, "red" signifies "leading the project management", the first and foremost of the seven Proactive Project Management main activities. "Red" is also used to color the boxes referring to the six sequential management phases, i.e., the project's life span. In particular, three of them are marked with an "11" indicating the chapter of the book in which they are described. Observe that this book's chapter 11 encompasses how to organize three phases in the diagram compared to the others that each cover how to organize only one phase, and further that project execution typically encompasses the highest intensity of effort and stress. Then it is rather surprising to find that chapter 11 turns out to be the shortest of all of the four "red" chapters!

Therefore we turned to chapter 11 for closer scrutiny. *Chapter 11: Manage Project Execution* is introduced with the following statement:¹³

"After a well-performed project start-up with related detailed project planning, the task is to promote a management of the project execution that ensures coherence in the project, keeps up the steam, and promotes its result-orientation."

This statement is further clarified in the following section that we find very instructive:¹⁴

"A book on proactive project management might end here. If just some of the proposals in the previous chapters have been put into practice, your project is now up and running. In such a case you have during the project preparation phase accomplished analyses, master planning, and anchoring together with the involved parties. Since then, the outcome from the preparation phase has been anchored and reviewed with the project participants during the project start-up – and the detailed planning of the project execution has been carried out. Hereafter, limited project management effort should be needed.

"However, *from* the ending of the project start-up *up* to initiating the project close-out, it is also necessary to proactively organize the project management. An example of an instrument for this purpose is to arrange a project evaluation phase during the course of the project."

Subsequently, after referencing several preceding and following chapters by way of detailed explanations, this section goes on to explain:¹⁵

"To be competent in managing the project execution is not just a question of being able to perform project management when a situation makes it necessary – such as, to organize a steering group meeting when it is needed, to have the detailed plan updated when that is needed, and to communicate activities according to the communication plan when that is appropriate.

"It is just as important to *lead* the project management; for example, during the period between two main milestones. This entails applying instruments that promote a project management effort — and which encourage involvement of the relevant participants and parties in the management activities."

The term "project management" is used frequently but we were unsure just what the author had in mind in these descriptions. We looked in vain for a definition of the term, but the closest we could come is the following explanation:¹⁶

"The purpose of project management – and consequently its overall function – is to promote:

- achievement of the expected outcome and effect of the project,
- compliance with the agreed frameworks for time, budget and resources, and
- realization of the involved parties' benefits from participating."

At this point we are reminded of Henri Fayol's classic description of management: "To manage is to forecast and plan, to organize, to command, to coordinate and to control."¹⁷ That is to say: the "Monitor and Control" stages of the classic sequence: "Plan, Organize, Execute, Monitor and Control".

We think that chapter 11 could be much simplified by referring directly to this classic management performance structure description.

Summary and conclusions

In this review, we have been captivated by the chance to read about the basic philosophy and tools of project management described from a practical and quite specific perspective that boils down to taking the initiative and *leading* the project. As a result we have touched on only a few of the tools and advice provided in Morten Fangel's book and therefore only scratched its surface. Every chapter is derived from Morten's personal experience and is rife with bulleted checklists, examples, graphics, recommendations, and short illustrative anecdotes.

For example, early on Morten warns against overkill by suggesting:¹⁸

"It is important to adapt the management effort in your project to what is needed in your current project. In this book we talk about to 'scale' the management effort. I have chosen in most of the chapters to give proposals for method application related to three levels for the management effort in a project.

- Management Level 1 – Low level with limited application of project methods and relatively limited time spent on project management. The project manager is the main executor of the project and handles project management as an additional task.
- Management Level 2 – Medium level with modified application of methods and moderate time spent on project management. The project manager handles the management of the project along with other tasks within and in addition to the project.
- Management Level 3 – High level with almost consistent application of project methods and relatively large amount of time spent on project management. The project manager has the management of the project as his/her main task."

In another instance, the whole of chapter 6 is dedicated to *Project analyses*. It consists of seven subsections as follows:¹⁹

1. Introduction to project analyses generally
2. Introduction to your current project
3. Analysis of the project situation
4. Analysis of the potential project results
5. Analysis of the potential interested parties

6. Analysis of the potential project risks
7. Scaling the application of the analyses findings

As Morten explains:

"The aim [of project analysis] is to establish a solid basis for (further) planning as well as anchoring of the project towards the determining parties. Performed properly, the analyses are also a vital means for informing and motivating the project participants and parties [during the course of the project]."

Note, however, that as a conclusion to the chapter, Morten describes subsection 7's valuable advice this way:

"As a summing up of this chapter, we will now consider when it is relevant to use the analysis methods, in what scope they could be recommended, with which degree of involvement – and how the outcome of the analysis is best applied."

Similarly, the whole of chapter 10 is dedicated to describing how to *perform Detailed project planning*. That is:²⁰

"What should be done to achieve a shared understanding of the practical implementation, and to achieve a suitable basis for the project follow-up. The issue is what do you need to plan, how much, with whom – and which tools to use."

We do have to conclude by observing that we found very little discussion about project budgeting, tracking, and controlling project costs. However, aside from the question of proper project accounting, if the project is properly run following the suggestions provided in Morten Fangel's book, then the costs should look after themselves.

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¹ Proactive Project Management © Fangel Consulting, Saettedammen 4, DK 3400 Hilleroed, Denmark.

² Ibid, p12. Note: The emphasis is the author's.

³ Ibid.

⁴ Ibid.

⁵ Ibid, p13.

⁶ Ibid.

⁷ See Scope-Pak Planning "Step 3: Objectives and Outputs" at <http://www.maxwideman.com/papers/scopepak/steps1-4.htm>

⁸ Ibid, p12.

⁹ Abstracted from p14.

¹⁰ Ibid, p15.

¹¹ Ibid pp 16, 17, 299, 333, 355, 379 & 397

¹² Ibid, p236.

¹³ Ibid, p333

¹⁴ Ibid, p335

¹⁵ Ibid, pp335-336

¹⁶ Ibid, p26

¹⁷ Fayol, H., Administration Industrielle et Generale, 1916.

¹⁸ Proactive Project Management: Abstracted from p20.

¹⁹ Ibid, p135

²⁰ Ibid, p299