



The Importance of Framing and Alignment on a Project

David van der Walt
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Introduction

How often have you seen one scope change after another on a project, and wondered what were the reasons behind these changes? After some investigation, it becomes apparent that the decision-makers of the business were not aligned as to the objectives of the project. As a result, changes are constantly initiated as different decision-makers express their unique needs or personal preferences. Sometimes the project owner's judgement is clouded by what he or she may want, rather than what the business really needs. These scope changes are devastating to any project and cost overruns, schedule slip and quality impairment is the norm.

It has been found that if framing is done well at the start of the project, the project will experience fewer scope changes and have a greater chance of achieving the business objectives. Proper framing at the start of a project implies that the business owner understands the true business need, gets the buy-in of the key stakeholders, and ensures that everyone on the project is aligned to the business and project objectives, as captured in the project charter.

What typically happens during the initiation stage of a project is that the business team either has operational problems to solve, or other business opportunities they would prefer to pursue. The temptation is great amongst the engineers to immediately start with the engineering design and development of what they perceive to be the solution to the 'problem'. After many months of engineering, it is then 'discovered' that the proposed design does not meet the business objectives. The proposed design is often very expensive, thus requiring rework, descoping and other cost cutting exercises, falsely disguised as 'value engineering'.

Not focusing on the business objectives from the outset of a project, frequently manifests in misalignment, misunderstanding, and inappropriate project objectives. From an owner perspective, the correct way to start with a new project is firstly to understand the true need of the business. Should the business need to solve a problem in their operations, it would add value to conduct a root cause analysis to establish the true need, to avoid addressing a symptom rather than the true need of the business.

Framing the project

The objective of the initial opportunity framing process is to ensure the right problem is tackled, from the right perspective, by the right people. Framing a project properly at the outset will assist in aligning the team towards success and reduce the probability of failure.

Framing is thus the process of putting a frame around the project by defining the high-level boundaries within which the project will be developed. It provides the owner with a basis for what the business needs, and provides the project team with clear guidance and direction on the boundaries within which the project team can develop the project scope. It thus includes the business needs and objectives, the project objectives, the high-level scope foreseen and the business value chain areas it will cover, the killer risks facing the project and the business affordable cost and schedule. Opportunity framing is shown graphically in Figure 1. It allows the owner team to hit the ground running.



Figure 1: Opportunity framing

A major objective of the framing process is to ensure that all key decision-makers that are impacted by the project in the relevant business value chain, or those that can influence the outcome of the project, are aligned with the frame. Alignment thus starts with the framing of the project.

What can project owners do to ensure effective project framing? The following is a list of essential requirements for effective framing:

- Be clear on the true business need;
- Ensure all key stakeholders are aligned with the business need at the start of project;
- Be clear on the business objectives;
- Effectively translate the business objectives into clear and measurable project objectives;
- Capture the business need and objectives clearly in a sponsor mandate and project charter; and
- List and fully understand the assumptions underlying the business objectives.

Project alignment

Alignment is the process of aligning the project team to the frame set during project initiation. As can be seen in Figure 2, the frame sets the direction, or rather the tune, and the alignment process makes sure everyone plays to the same tune.

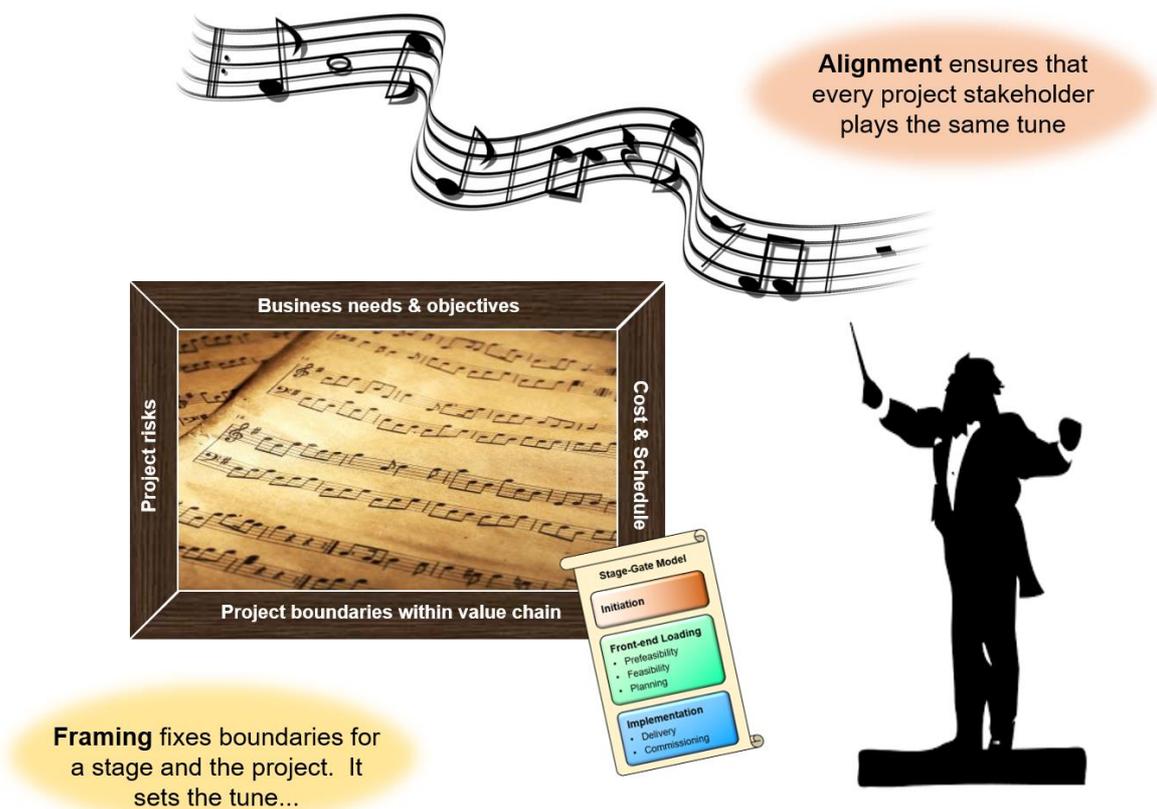


Figure 2: Framing and alignment in context

According to Griffith and Gibson (2001), project alignment needs to be addressed on three levels, namely project life-cycle, organisational level and inter-project, as shown in Figure 3. Firstly, alignment is required from one stage to the next in the project life-cycle. Throughout the project stages, information is firmed up and assumptions may change. It is thus crucial to make sure that project team members are aligned to any changes to the project frame and definition as they move from one stage to the next. Furthermore, alignment is required throughout all organisational levels. From the approval authority, to the project sponsor, business management, project management, any functional or discipline support functions, all project team members and all affected contractors. Lastly, in the event of a project comprising several modules, or a programme with sub-projects, alignment is required between these modules or sub-projects.

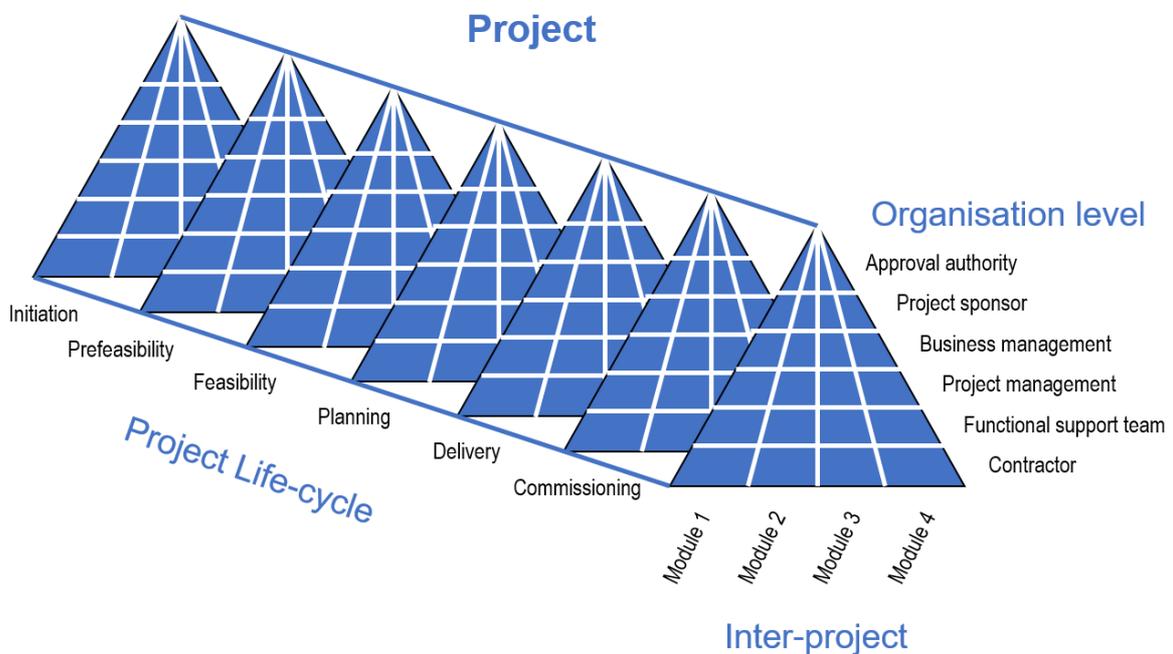


Figure 3: Project Alignment (Adapted from Griffith and Gibson, 2001)

In the event of multiple modules or sub-projects, the sequencing of such projects is crucial. Should misalignment occur, the whole project will be adversely affected. Alignment is thus not a 'soft' issue, but an essential part of any project's activities.

Achieving alignment

First and foremost, the opportunity framing process should be done well, involving the right decision-makers. By aligning the decision-makers up front, the likelihood of changes being imposed from above is reduced.

Secondly, the alignment process should be well planned and properly executed. On-boarding sessions and kick-off meetings should be held to ensure that all project

stakeholders from all organisational levels, are on the same page. Every single event or meeting should be considered an alignment opportunity. Examples include risk reviews, gate reviews, and so forth. Alignment should also be ensured between sub-projects/modules, and from one project stage to the next. Every new project stage should be started with an alignment session for existing and new stakeholders. During these sessions, the project frame can be updated to reflect the latest information.

To be able to do effective alignment, it is useful to have a standard project communication pack which is updated continually throughout the life-cycle of the project. The project sponsor and project manager must take ownership of this communication pack and ensure that the party line and assumptions are always up to date.

Concluding remarks

Depending on the size and complexity of a project, framing can be done in a one to three day facilitated intervention, provided all relevant decision-makers participate.

Alignment is no small task, nor is alignment an event. Achieving and maintaining alignment is a process. A process that never ends, until such time that the project has realised the benefits it set out to achieve at the start of the project. If planned and executed well, your project will run like a well-oiled machine.

Feel free to contact any of our consultants for assistance with project framing and alignment in your organisation.

References

Griffith, A.F. & Gibson, G.E. (Jr), 2001, *Alignment during preproject planning*, Journal of Management in Engineering, Vol. 17, No. 2.