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Lucid Thought

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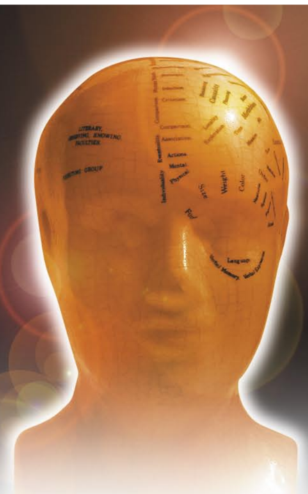
First published in Project Manager Today



LUCID 27 THOUGHT

To change, or not to change - that is the question

It is well established that projects and programmes are vehicles used by organisations to manage change; whether the change be new products and services, modified ways of working or transformed attitudes or cultures. Links to strategy research suggest that project management is a good way to implement deliberate (planned) change but a poor way to deal with emergent (unplanned) change. Adoption of a programme framework enables emergent change to be captured and made sense of, and new or modified projects to be implemented to activate the change.

So for projects, there is wide acceptance in published bodies of knowledge and methods that once the early life cycle concept and definitions phases are complete and the project plans (PMP, PID, PEP) approved and baselined that change should be by exception and using a controlled process. However; Project Managers and sponsors are also faced with a dilemma when they must decide whether to:

- *Adopt a beneficial change that would deliver greater long-term value, or*
- *Press on regardless and deliver the original scope within time, cost and quality requirements.*

The driver behind this Lucid Thought is the experience of one of our clients who have feedback from an international benchmarking organisation that they are too willing to change previously agreed plans during the project implementation/execution phase and that competitors who refuse at all costs to do this generally perform better in terms of the key performance indicators in that sector. What is interesting here is that what the company took to be a strength; i.e. the managerial flexibility to react to changes in the project environment and to ultimately deliver what was needed (fit for purpose), was considered by the benchmarking organisation to be a major weakness.

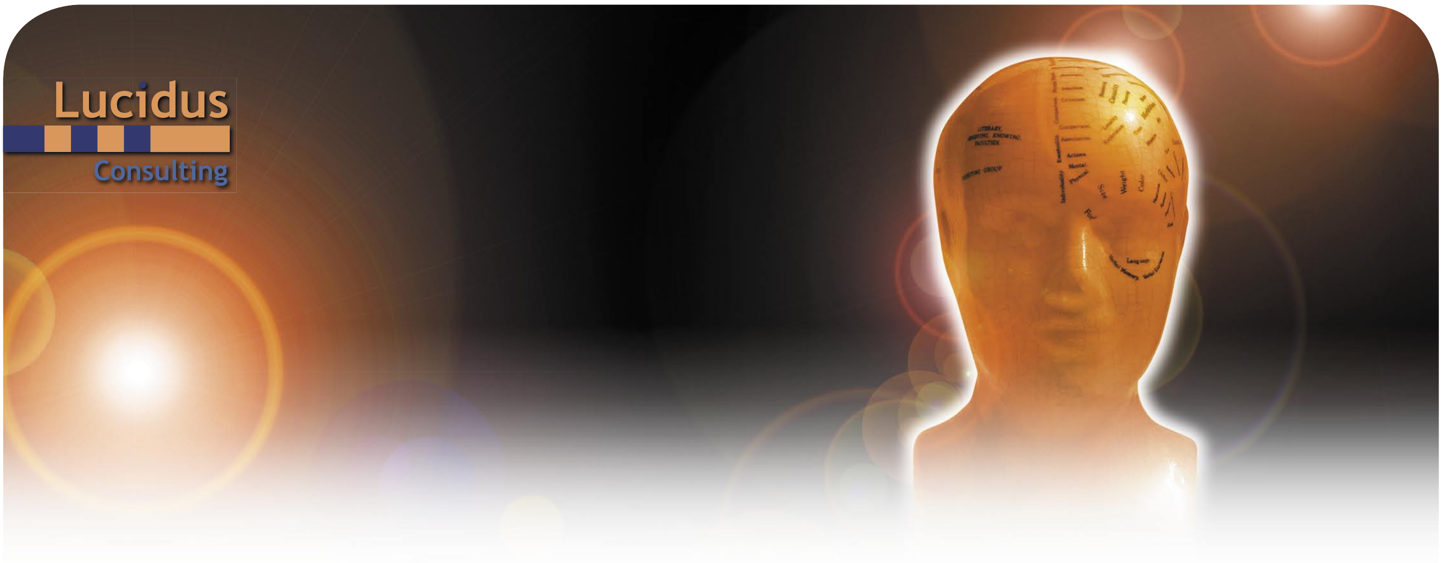
In a project situation where objectives and scope are clearly defined and the environment in which the final deliverable will be used is fixed and can be determined at the project outset then a 'no change' mindset during execution must be the starting point. When this is not the case and the context is uncertain and a source of a large number of high impact risks with the potential of both downside and upside impact, then a Project Manager surely must behave differently to make sure that project performance is optimal.

The key seems to lie in that word 'optimal' and having a deep understanding of the relative priorities between scope, time, cost and quality and the links between these and business benefits/value. Maybe the benchmarking company are reporting that with a high value product, the biggest priority will always be 'time to market' and so it is better to deliver a sub-optimal solution on time than a more perfect solution late?

Or maybe the benchmarking company are reflecting the fine line between **"thinking again for good (emergent change based) reasons"** and **"thinking again because we didn't really think it through properly the first time"?**

Without doubt, this subject also raises again the grey area between projects and programmes, particularly for 'mega-projects' - ones that will spend billions over many years.

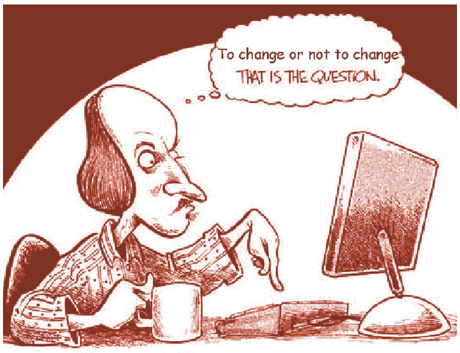
One key differentiator between projects and programmes is the



ability to decompose the scope of work to be done at the start. If the change required is clear, measurable project success criteria can be defined and scope can be decomposed (using product/work breakdown type approaches) then the literature would tell us that was a project. If the change required is more aspirational relying on high level business measures of success and where all the scope cannot be defined with certainty at the start then the literature would tell us that was a programme.

In a Lucid Thought 06, we discussed other cases from our consulting experience where large projects could perhaps benefit from using a programme framework where change at programme level could be embraced, but with projects within the programme being tightly defined and rigorously delivered with a 'no change' rule firmly upheld.

Writing this piece seems to have brought us to the same conclusion, but with an extra message. The extra message is the absolute need to understand the relative priorities of the competing project objectives. It is fundamental that those making decisions about whether to adopt a change or not understand whether the most important thing (to the business) is to deliver on time, or to budget, or meeting specification, or whether the most important driver is the return on investment that the company will make some time post project. Once again this is more evidence for the active partnership between sponsor and Project Manager and a shared understanding of both business drivers and project solutions to those drivers. That way, change requests can be evaluated against the things that matter the most and optimal decisions made.



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