

Mastering Projects Series
Are Plans Useless?

No Time to Plan!

“In preparing for battle I have always found that plans are useless, but planning is indispensable.”

Dwight D. Eisenhower

Does your organization gravitate toward the “useless” part of Eisenhower’s observation? Perhaps you’ve heard people say things like this:

- “We don’t have time to plan – we’ve got to show some progress on this project by Friday!”
- “Planning is a luxury we can’t afford. We must start coding immediately if we want to ship this new software by the deadline.”

However, a short-term head start on the schedule is not worth plunging the project into chaos later. Rushing through definition and planning at the front end of a project often leads to excessive rework later. Figure 1 shows how rework lengthens the schedule, eventually making the project worse instead of better. The late changes and fixes also reduce quality, and the project team finishes the project frazzled and burned out – not in any condition to take on the next big project.

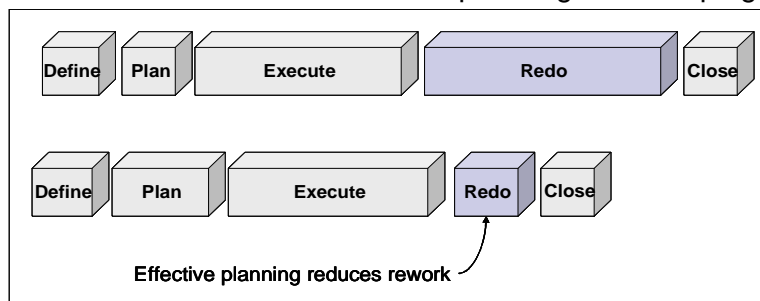


Figure 1: Cost of Poor Planning

Six Honest Serving Men

The Project Management Body of Knowledge (PMBOK) emphasizes that successful projects require good planning. Planning is so important that the PMBOK devotes the largest of its five process groups entirely to planning.

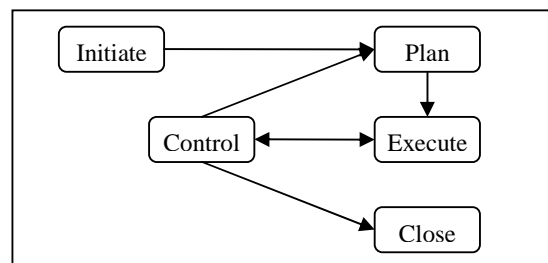


Figure 2: PMBOK Project Management Lifecycle

Project management author Eric Verzuh makes a colorful case for building a realistic project plan that is balanced against reality. He quotes the poet Rudyard Kipling.

I keep six honest serving men,
 (They taught me all I knew)
 Their names are What and Why and When
 And How and Where and Who.

Verzuh continues, “Was Kipling talking about project management? Maybe not, but his rhyme makes a good case for planning. Developing realistic cost and

schedule estimates – and actually meeting them – requires detailed planning.”¹

How do you make a plan that is “good enough” while avoiding analysis paralysis? For efficient planning, take a cue from Kipling’s serving men. Effective planning arranges the serving men in a specific sequence: first *Why*, then *What*, followed by *How* and *When* and *Who*. Many of us are sorely tempted to start a project by jumping directly to *how*, so we pay dearly for rushing past *why* and *what*.

The authors of the PMBOK must have been fans of Kipling, because they followed his advice. Most of the PMBOK’s first phase (*Initiation*) is devoted to the *why* and *what* of a project. *How* and the other serving men come later, during the *Planning* phase.

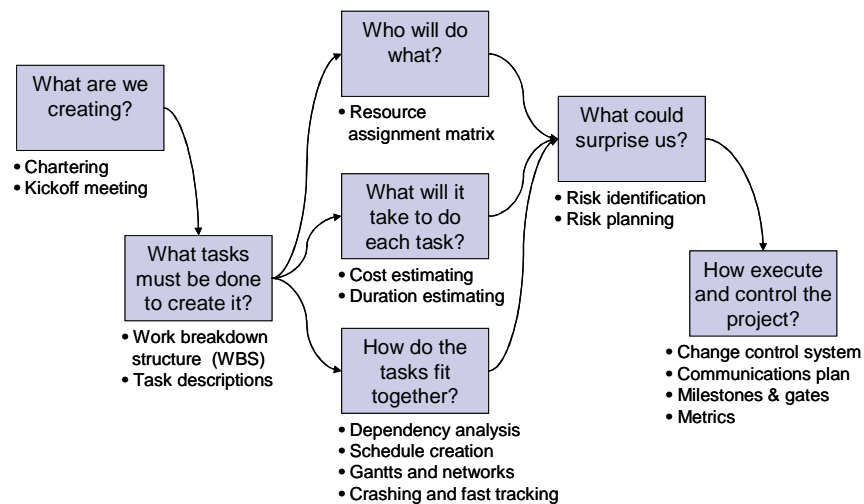
Tame the Complexity of Planning

The PMBOK lists over 20 processes that must happen during comprehensive planning. Every one of these planning processes is valuable for some projects, but the sheer quantity seems overwhelming, especially for smaller projects. Fortunately, the essence of planning boils down to just seven simple questions. Answering these seven questions will not replace every one of the PMBOK’s comprehensive processes, but simple planning that

actually gets done beats extensive planning that is too formidable to start!

Get your planning off to a great start by answering these seven questions in the order shown in the diagram.

1. What are we creating?
2. What tasks must we do to create it?
3. How do the tasks fit together?
4. What time, people, and resources are needed to do each task?
5. Who will do what?
6. What could surprise us?
7. How will we manage the execution and control of the project?



Be Flexible and Realistic

Now that you know how to tame the planning process, I will leave you with some final tips.

1. *Avoid planning paralysis:* We’ve seen that skimping on planning can destroy a project. Too much planning can be just as deadly. Realize that you won’t have, and don’t even want, a perfect plan. When you reach the point of diminishing returns on your planning

effort, jump into execution and trust your team's ability to be flexible and creative.

2. *Your crystal ball is broken:* Planning is trying to predict the future, so any plan is bound to be wrong in some important aspects. Build a flexible plan that will be resilient and adaptable when the unexpected happens. For projects that are subject to much uncertainty, take advantage of successive refinement, which iterates through planning and execution activities. Each iteration produces more information that is used to refine the next cycle further. Successive refinement is a cornerstone of iterative and agile methodologies, but you can use it anywhere.
3. *Don't stick your head in the sand:* Be willing to make hard tradeoffs to make your plans realistic. As Pinto and Kharbanda say, "Project trade-off decisions ... are frequently balancing acts among rival (and

seemingly equally compelling) demands. Hard decisions are the requisite of project management. Uniformed decisions, however, are its bane."²

Endpoint

Skimping on project planning leads to chaos later. You can't afford not to plan, so do it smartly. Use Kipling's serving men and the seven questions of planning to create an effective, flexible plan without getting mired in planning paralysis.

¹ Eric Verzuh, *The Fast Forward MBA in Project Management*, second edition, 2005, p. 7 - 9

² Jeffrey Pinto and Om Kharbanda, *How to Fail in Project Management (Without Really Trying)*, Business Horizons, July - August 1996, HBS publishing reprint BH010, p. 51 - 52

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