

# How to make projects work in your company

*An article for senior management of Biotech and Pharma Services organizations by John Faulkes and Ralph White*

Managing projects is like dealing with gifted children: they promise great things – but they often go ‘off the rails’! Yet firms worldwide are realizing that they have to get much better at project working, and fast.

## Why is this important now?

As a Biotech firm, device/platform company or CRO/CMO, you may run into at least two problems as a consequence of being successful. Firstly, as you grow, the initial, entrepreneurial group of people that got it all started is augmented by new function experts – regulatory execs, clinical managers – as well as a new tier of employees who may not be as vitally engaged in the business as you are. Secondly, your company may well need to integrate seamlessly with alliance partners and of course the big companies who may be major investors or customers.

A project-based approach is essential to survive and thrive in this complex environment.

But it’s much more than improving planning and budgeting. It’s more than goal setting and focused decision-making – even though improvements to these may make a real difference.

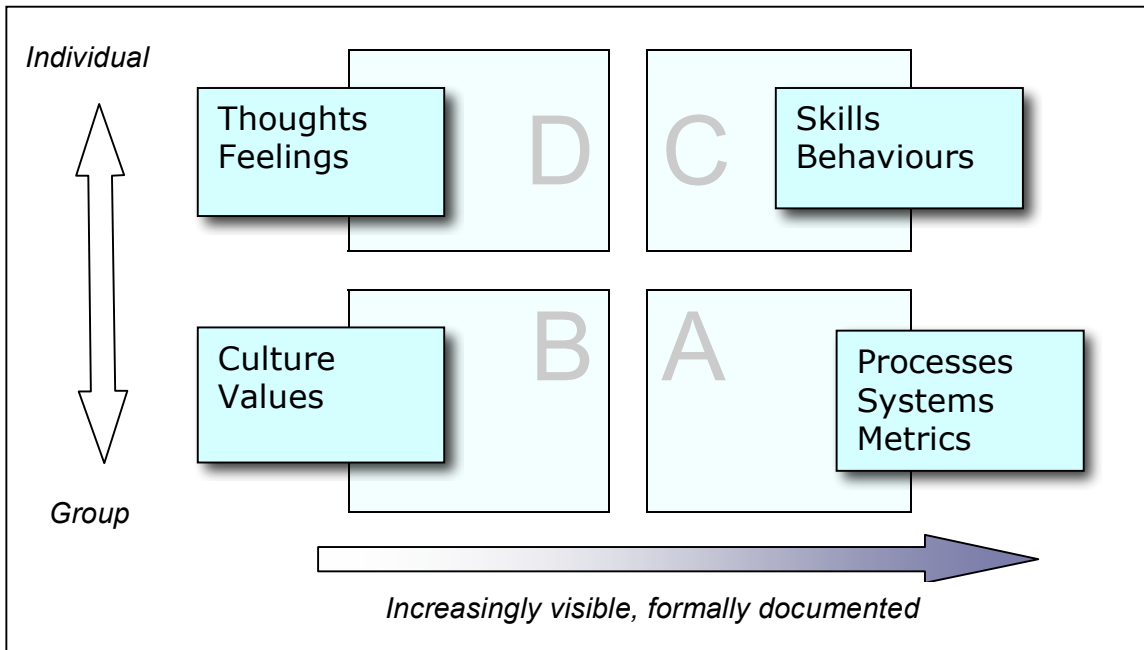
It’s about *realizing collaboration between the different specialists that make up your business*. They need to initiate solutions to challenges with the essential minimum of senior management time. They need to operate with prime loyalty to your company’s commercial goals, rather than their own functions.

## Why best intentions often run into trouble

Whenever people talk about ‘project management’, you’ll hear lots of stuff about Gantt charts, budgets, stage / gate models and so on. This is no surprise - these are the key tools we give to project managers and the teams we appoint around them.

*But this isn’t the whole story*. Even if you concentrate hard on getting these things right, a whole lot of other things can stop you succeeding!

A powerful way to look inside your business to find out exactly where the barriers might be, is the ‘window’ model, shown in the diagram.



All of the systems that you may define and adopt to run your business, can be described within **Box A**. This will include all of the planning, budgeting and decision-making processes that you may bring in to run your projects.

These processes are essential and you have to get them right. They may be complicated and multi-layered, but we've grouped them together because of the way they work – they're all *instructions*, or sometimes as *rules* - they tell people what they *should* do.

But in **Box B** is what *really* happens. 'Culture' means '*how we really do things around here*', and the biggest influence on your company culture is the behavior of senior people. Here's when we see the biggest disconnects!

It sometimes happens because we give the job of designing the project system to a special unit. The senior team are too busy, and approve changes without intimate involvement. So guess what – they continue to do things in the old ways. Or sometimes, the senior, and middle guys just don't like the new regime. So they don't change.

We often find that companies have appointed potentially capable project managers. And sent them to be trained. But even if you do this you may still suffer from real problems in **Box C**. Most project management training programs focus hard on the Box A stuff – and also are not designed for the special environment that Biotech firms inhabit.

Not only this, your PMs will find that if their team members have had no training, they just can't understand how a proper project system is supposed to work.

In **Box D**, (although this is the least visible of all the four panes), you could well find a deal of people feeling dissatisfied, confused and less than 100% enthusiastic. Worse than that, they may not tell you either. You'll only find out when you need to ask for extra effort – and find that it's just not available.

## **What needs to change (1): how senior and function managers need to work differently**

Your senior team needs to discuss in depth how a project system is going to work. It can't be run as a sideshow. It may change the way the top team operates.

Most importantly, you need to consider the level of authority you empower your project teams with. If they get some – then somebody else loses some. You'll end up creating important roles in the Project Managers – but how will senior staff react to this? It may raise a few sensitivities – and it needs to. It can be an open and very positive board-led change process, but if not addressed it can turn into a whole firestorm of unspoken arguments. We have always found that these discussions work better and faster when facilitated by an external expert.

When you have agreed your strategy for building the project system, the top team needs to be determined and united on it. If you aren't – people will know and they'll exploit the gaps!

## **What needs to change (2): how people need to enhance their skills**

No classroom course will equip someone fully to manage projects in our sector. Biotech and Pharma projects have a special and complex demand for scientific credibility, systematic, process skills, and people skills.

From time to time we get asked to deliver program that covers as many of these elements as possible. It makes a difference, but we're always clear that much more is needed. Project managers really develop their capabilities in action – by working to enhance the performance of their teams and gradually building their own leadership capability. Facilitation of teams, coaching, as well as taking related courses such as meetings management, influencing skills, assertive communication, need to be planned into a program of development.

One more thing we often forget – super-effective project managers make only a limited impact if their team members have no understanding of how a project system operates. In particular they struggle to understand how they are supposed to report to both a project manager and a line manager. Short sessions where they can talk these issues around and ask questions, make a marked difference.

## **What needs to change (3): how company systems need to evolve**

Two, interrelated systems really need to be developed to a high level if you want to make a project system work.

Across your business, you must have joined up plans. People actually doing the work must make their own plans, but they can't make them using a different format to everyone else in the company. Ideally, you have to appoint someone to coordinate plans and to highlight either resource conflict or spare capacity to the senior team.

Secondly, you have to have prioritization of project work, decided at the top level. In fact this becomes the day to day job for the senior VPs.

## **So what's the cost: what sort of commitment, time and money does it take to develop an efficient project system?**

Depending on where you are and how big you are, it will take you about six months, if you are really committed. Longer if you lose focus. You will very likely need some external assistance. For a small to mid-sized firm (say 80 – 300 staff) you will need anything from 15 – 40 days of consultant time. From our experience we'd say this could involve interviews with people across the business, several one day workshops for the senior team; group and one to one coaching work with your project managers; short sessions for functional project team members.

It will involve a lot of briefings on how things will change, but also a lot of listening.

What can help shortcut this is to use some surveys and assessments; it may be enormously valuable to find out exactly what staff members think. We've used some assessment tools to highlight current strengths and development needs of project managers.

In conclusion, the payback for all this is huge, even though it can be difficult to achieve.

If you're successful, you'll be delegating much of the day to day supervision of product development, or customer management, to your project teams. You'll have more time to spend on considering the major decisions, as well as the job you're really there for: creating the strategies for coming years.

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