Is Planning Predictive or Persuasive

Do project plans predict or create the future?

To paraphrase Gen. George S. Patton, *"A good plan, enthusiastically executed now, is better than a perfect plan next week."* The objective of this article is to suggest that too much emphasis is placed on developing 'perfect plans' that attempt to accurately predict future outcomes (a passive process)—and not enough on using the planning and scheduling processes to proactively influence the project's future direction.

The thinking behind this proposition comes from American political theorist John H. Schaar, who said: *"The future is not a result of choices among alternative paths offered by the present, but a place that is created—created first in the mind and will, created next in activity. The future is not some place we are going, but one we are creating. The paths are not to be found, but made. And the activity of making them changes both the maker and the destination*[1]*."* In this frame, project plans become a guide to the pathway you are intending to make rather than a fixed prediction about achieving something in the future.

Unfortunately, the mathematical and scientific approaches to planning—particularly cost estimating and scheduling—have evolved in a way that implies that the plan is a factual statement of what will happen. This concept is embedded in contracts, law, and expert submissions going back decades. But is this approach the best way of achieving a good outcome? Fighting over what should have happened after it did not happen, and then allocating blame is not very useful, even in traditional industries.

My suggestion is that we adopt a more agile and adaptive approach to planning focused on engaging all of the important stakeholders. This type of collaboration is far more likely to craft success! Working with people to build a plan they are willing to commit to achieving is far better than telling them what the plan says they have to do. Then working with them to progressively adapt the plan to deal with the unfolding reality on your shared journey towards success is far more likely to optimise the eventual outcome.

To quote Otto von Bismarck *"A bad plan that is well executed will yield much better results then a good plan that is poorly executed."* Based on this philosophy, what's needed for project success is an adequate plan that the project team is committed to achieving! Unfortunately, all too often in the project controls space *"Perfection [becomes] the enemy of progress"* (Winston Churchill), particularly given the fact that it is impossible to precisely predict the future.

The project objectives of time, costs and outcomes are unlikely to change in most projects and are often contractual commitments, but the pathway you chose to follow towards achieving these objectives is yours to make, adapt and improve along the way. The two key ingredients for success are building consensus and commitment with the stakeholders (particularly those involved in the work)—and then keeping them engaged. In this scenario, the project plans become a key communication tool and people are held accountable for achieving their freely given commitments[2].

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[1] Legitimacy in the Modern State (ed. Transaction Publishers, 1981) - ISBN: 9781412827485

[2] For more on **the project plan as a communication tool** see: https://mosaicprojects.com.au/PMKI-SCH-008.php

To achieve this, the right stakeholders need to be engaged at the right time:

- Setting the overall strategy for achieving success needs senior management, procurement management, contract management, and other similar stakeholders involved in the conversation, this sets the overall time and cost budgets for the project, then

- Planning how the strategy will be implemented needs supplier and subcontractor management involved and working with the project management team, the typical look-ahead period may be 1 to 2 years, updated every 6 months or so,

- Scheduling the work needed to implement the plan requires the team leaders, first line supervisors to become involved, working with the project management team to optimize the flow of work on a day-to-day basis, the typical look-ahead period may be 3 months, updated every couple of weeks.

Within this framework[3], the role of the project controls team is to maintain traceability, cross-system coordination, and keeping the process moving.

The analytical aspects of planning are still important, and should be used to support this approach. There is no point in committing to a plan that will deliver failure. What the analysis shows is the scope of the problem to be solved, and the solution is crafted with the project's stakeholders. The trade-offs and challenges of project management don't change; the difference is moving from a paradigm where the project manager tries to make people work to the plan, to one where the project manager leads the team in planning to achieve the project's objectives and outcomes.

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[3] This framework is an adaptation of *rolling wave and schedule density* concepts -
Rolling Wave see: https://mosaicprojects.com.au/WhitePapers/WP1060_Rolling_Wave.pdf
Schedule Density see: https://mosaicprojects.com.au/WhitePapers/WP1016_Schedule_Density.pdf