

## Make Your Steering Committee Effective

Far too many sponsors, executives and project managers waste far too much time in ineffective steering committee meetings or 'project/program control board' meetings (both referred to as PCB<sup>1</sup> in this article). A huge saving in waste and its associated costs can easily be achieved.



The first key question for the organisation's governance team to consider is, is there any need for a PCB? I would suggest in most cases, provided the organisation has well trained and effective sponsors, there is no need for a PCB. When deciding if the costs of a PCB are warranted, the following factors should be considered:

- Is the project/program large by the standards of the organisation?
- Is the project/program more uncertain, complicated or more complex (these concepts are different)<sup>2</sup> compared to the normal projects undertaken by the organisation?
- Are the risks associated with the project/program higher than normal?

If the answer to any two of the above questions is affirmative, a PCB is probably warranted. If only one answer is affirmative, it is probably sufficient to appoint an experienced and committed sponsor<sup>3</sup>; but the risks, costs, and stakeholder attitudes need to be considered. If the project is 'business as usual' there should be no need for a PCB<sup>4</sup>. The organisation's normal governance, surveillance<sup>5</sup>, project management and stakeholder engagement processes should be sufficient – the most cost-effective PCBs are the ones you don't have!

### Making the PCB efficient

Where a PCB is needed, no meeting should take longer than 30 minutes. The costs of running a PCB are in the range of \$2000 to \$5000 per hour (sometimes more) and the organisation needs to recoup value from

<sup>1</sup> **Note:** In the PRINCE2 methodology, the Project Board is a small team of 3 to 5 people that has specific project management and control functions working to support the project manager. This article does not address this type of PB, which can be very effective if properly constituted.

<sup>2</sup> For more on *categorising projects and the difference between complicated and complex* see: [https://www.mosaicprojects.com.au/WhitePapers/WP1072\\_Project\\_Size.pdf](https://www.mosaicprojects.com.au/WhitePapers/WP1072_Project_Size.pdf)

<sup>3</sup> For more on the *role of the sponsor* see: [https://www.mosaicprojects.com.au/WhitePapers/WP1031\\_Project\\_Sponsorship.pdf](https://www.mosaicprojects.com.au/WhitePapers/WP1031_Project_Sponsorship.pdf)

<sup>4</sup> As stated above, the PRINCE2 methodology requires a small PB for every project, the PB exercises the power allocated to the 'project manager' under other frameworks such as the *PMBOK® Guide* with the project manager being responsible for implementing the PB decisions. However, in PRINCE2 environments, it is common to see a 'steering committee' sitting above the PCB – the questions asked in this article refer to these 'steering committees'.

<sup>5</sup> For more on *project surveillance* see: [https://www.mosaicprojects.com.au/WhitePapers/WP1080\\_Project\\_Reviews.pdf](https://www.mosaicprojects.com.au/WhitePapers/WP1080_Project_Reviews.pdf)

each meeting<sup>6</sup>. This objective is achievable, but the PCB needs designing and managing so that it is cost and process efficient. The design and management functions are best assigned to either the portfolio management office or an executive level PMO.

The key elements in designing the PCB are:

- Every member of the PCB will be appointed for a specific reason and the person will know why they are appointed, what is expected of them and what to expect from the PCB processes.
- The relationship between the PCB and the change management processes are clearly defined.
- The relationship between the PCB and the key project stakeholders is understood. The primary function of the PCB is to champion the project and help maximise its value to the organisation<sup>7</sup>.
- PCB meetings only occur when decisions are required or a formal discussion is necessary, there will be no time wasting 'monthly meetings'. Routine communication between the PM, the sponsor and the PCB members should be designed to deal with business-as-usual information flows and general oversight. There should be no surprises for anyone, ever!
- Ensuring communication with each PCB member is timely and effective, this includes: providing each member with clear, concise and informative briefing packs which will arrive in a timely manner prior to the meeting; taking the time to 'walk' each member through the briefing pack and ensuring any questions are shared, and preferably addressed, in advance of the meeting.
- Where PCB members have other questions or require additional information, these are communicated to the project/program manager and the sponsor in adequate time to allow proper responses to be developed and circulated to all of the PCB prior to the meeting. It's not the job of a PCB to test the PM with 'left field' questions during the meeting.
- Ensuring the meetings run effectively, finish on time, have minutes circulated promptly and that all decisions are logged, referenced, and promptly communicated to all effected parties. The key responsibility of the PCB is to make timely decisions on matters that affect the organisation (not the day-to-day running of the project).



Developing PCBs that work efficiently does require the PMO responsible for the process to develop coaching and advocacy skills in addition to the PCB processes and procedures (there may be value in engaging an external coach to work with the executives in this space<sup>8</sup>). New PCB members will need coaching in their roles, PMs will need supervising to ensure effective, timely and complete information is

<sup>6</sup> For more on the *cost of committee meetings* see: [https://www.mosaicprojects.com.au/WhitePapers/WP1075\\_Meetings.pdf](https://www.mosaicprojects.com.au/WhitePapers/WP1075_Meetings.pdf)

<sup>7</sup> For more on the *functions and issues with steering committees* see: <https://mosaicprojects.wordpress.com/2015/12/13/is-your-steering-committee-costing-5000-per-hour/>

<sup>8</sup> A PCB Advisor is an independent delivery and governance expert who will ensure there are no surprises. This doesn't mean that everything will go to plan (an impossible pipe dream), rather that all parties understand their responsibilities, have access to skills development and coaching, are aware of the risks they are managing and that discussions around the issues are never hidden. In the same way a company secretary connects the Governance Board to the CEO and Executive management team, it is logical on a project risky enough to require a PCB, to have a PCB Advisor providing a similar function connecting the PCB to the Project or Program Manager.

made available to the PCB, ensuring proper governance processes are followed, and to ensure there are no surprises in either direction by connecting the executive decision makers on the PCB to the project/program delivery teams.

Nothing suggested above is 'rocket science', but if implemented effectively will lead to projects and programs that keep progressing with open communication and efficient decision making from transparent reporting and discussion. When achieved, this process makes both the project sponsor, and the project manager's life easier and more productive, generating increased value for the organisation..

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