

# THE PROCESS OF ADVANCING PROJECT MANAGEMENT IN ORGANISATIONS

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## Abstract

Part of being a professional project company is continuously to aim at advancing the project management level and the good practice in and around the projects.

The advancement process is not only a task for the company management and the specialists in competence and method development. To have project management competence means *also* to contribute to a continuously improved management of projects – both at project level and company level.

The paper offers you an opportunity to consider what has been done up till now by yourself or your company to advance the project handling – and how the efforts can be improved. As a starting point we describe a spectrum of 12 instruments, which can be utilised for the advancement of project management. The spectrum covers both classic methods such as development of guidelines and training - and more recent methods such as coaching, sparring between project managers and organisational initiatives.

Based on the checklist of 12 instruments we will report on practical experiences from advancing project management in a Nordic corporation.

Further, it is explained how the tool "Danish Competence Baseline" can be used in various ways as a means for other advancement initiatives in addition to self-assessment of competencies.

Though it exceed the format of the abstract we allow us on the following pages to include an extensive draft of the first part of the article in which we present the spectrum of the 12 instruments.

## Improvements are requested – but challenging to achieve

*Many reasons indicate* a growing importance for the company to make a conscious effort to advance the level of project management – including to facilitate competence advancement of project owners, project managers and project participants.

- *Customers make demands also on management of projects*, including demands for the project managers to be certified – or competence in project management to be visualised otherwise.
- A growing number of companies report project management as a *strategic competence*, i.e. a precondition for the company activity.
- *Demands from employees on improved working conditions* when participating as manager or participant in projects.
- There is typically *considerable replacement among the project managers of the company*, which makes request for ongoing competence advancement of the new managers – and an effort to maintain already achieved competencies and existing project culture.
- Need for *extending the range of competencies in project management*. For example, it could be necessary with a further advancement from "guiding project managers" towards "communicating project managers".

However, there are also *many challenges*, when the question is to achieve and maintain a high level for the management of the projects in the company:

- One thing is individually to learn project management by heart, another thing is to *practice all the good intentions* - to incorporate and apply the methods automatically.
- Also a challenge to *extend the range of competencies*. To go from a few project management heroes – to routine in the execution of project management.
- Demanding to *keep a continuously improvement process alive*. For example, the network groups between the project managers often shrink after a few meetings

- It is almost a "natural law" that the employees in an *organisation relapse into the "line behaviour"* – if the project concept including project management is not continuously "advertised".
- Project orientation is a question of *changing the power structure in the company* – per definition a challenge.

Summing up, advancement and maintenance of the project management level in the company is very often a more challenging task than expected. Partly because of the mentioned challenges – partly because good handling of projects is a matter of experiences and methods, but also a matter of modification of behaviour and adjustment of self-knowledge, both at managers, project managers and participants.

### Managing the PM advancement process

So much about the reasons for an applied approach in order to advance the project management and project culture of the company. First step is to consider how an aiming of advancing the company project management can be defined and organised.

The task of advancing the level of project handling can be regarded more or less broadly.

- One possibility is to open up for initiatives, e.g. ad hoc participation in external courses and ad hoc introduction of new methods and tools.
- Another is to make a coherent aiming based on a requirement analysis and with focus on establishing methods and tools as well as organising relevant courses.
- A third possibility is to aim at a total development process where the aim is to advance the *exercised* competencies of project management and to achieve real improvements in practice.

We also suggest that you characterise your company's present method for aiming at improving project management in the scheme below and how the task is expected to / should be approached in the future.

Managed by a unit in the organisation e.g. a project office			
Handled as a project across the organisation			
Handled in the existing line organisation			
	Ad hoc courses and methods / tools	Advancement process on methods / tools and appropriate training	Development process on competencies and incorporation of improvements

*Scheme for characterising the respectively present and future definition and organisation of the aiming at advancing the project management in the company.*

The three alternatives also reflect how many large companies have changed the way of improving project management stepwise: First step is to make single initiative based on the idea that project management is something that just has to be learned and perhaps supported by some tools. Based on recognition that the effect of ad hoc initiatives has been very modest, more integrated processes have been implemented, but still with focus on courses and methods. As this type of aiming also might have a limited effect on exercised competencies you could choose to attack the task as an innovative process. Such a process could contain elements from the other methods, but the charge is on changing the real handling of projects. Concerning the organisation of initiatives for advanced project management there are three alternatives:

- One possibility is that the advancement process is handled in the *line organisation* including by the existing staff function concerning personnel development.
- Another possibility is to “*order project concept*” i.e. to handle the advancement initiatives as a cross-organisational project (but perhaps use the term process – to avoid a mixture of contents and concept).
- A third possibility is that a *unit in the organisation* – e.g. a project office – manages the processes and acts as a “Centre of Excellence”

Once more, we recommend that you characterise on the scheme the respectively present and future definition and organisation of the aiming at advancing the project management in the company.

Concurrently with passing from first to second and third definition of task also the requirement for organising the process increases. The arrow in the scheme links the typical characterisation of strategies today – and the typical characterisation of how the aiming on improved project management should be structured.

The entire advancement process can be divided into three main focus areas:

- *The entire advancement process* including process management, anchoring of the advancement and clarification of the advancement requirement.
- *The project level* including advancement of project methods, training of project involved, coaching of project managers, and assistance to project management
- *The company level* including promotion of experience communication, project managers career path, making organisational initiatives, developing portfolio management and evaluating advancement effect.

On the next page are listed methods for each of the mentioned areas. The scheme can be applied as a brut structure of content for the current type of processes / projects.

However, the scheme is not a proposal for a phase process or a milestone plan, although there are some logic behind the selected rank of listing. Both the relevant focus areas and methods as well as the timing are consider at the planning of a current improvement process.

The spectrum of means will also be examined. We also encourage you during the reading to consider the experiences gained from application of means, both in the Danish Air Material Command and Siemens.

Therefore we recommend to select some advancements and incorporate then by using a broad range of methods – and not rely on one single method – as for example new internal project guidelines that cover the main part of the advancement areas of project management. If you want to do everything, you turn up with nothing!

The simple way of controlling the process is to arrange a stepwise tactic, starting by approaching one focus area, then another etc.! However, you might loose the synergy – the momentum, the impact – that normally results in an effect on the practical project handling.

In all cases, it is a precondition that something is initiated, that somebody *assumes responsibility* for the agreed operations – and that the agreed advancement of project management in the company is controlled.

## Methods for advancing the management of projects

<b>Advancement process</b>	<p><b>1. <i>Managing the PM advancement process</i></b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Planning coherent advancement process</li> <li>• Establishing internal advancement group as initiators</li> </ul> <p><b>2. <i>Anchoring the advancement process</i></b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Anchoring the effort solidly at the company management</li> </ul> <p><b>3. <i>Clarifying need for PM improvements</i></b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Analysis of strong / weak points in the project handling</li> <li>• Inspiration via conferences or introductory seminar / course</li> <li>• Benchmarking as to other companies / projects</li> <li>• Evaluation of total level of maturity as to project culture</li> <li>• Suitable improvements of the management of projects in brief</li> </ul>
<b>Project level</b>	<p><b>4. <i>Developing project management methods</i></b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Project guidelines with focus on improvement</li> <li>• Paradigm for project manual with forms</li> <li>• Platform for virtual communication in the projects</li> <li>• References to good examples and experienced colleagues</li> <li>• Method description in literature or course maps</li> </ul> <p><b>5. <i>Training project personnel</i></b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Internal basis courses for project managers, project participants and project owners</li> <li>• Extended training courses for project managers</li> <li>• Course sessions incorporated in current project process</li> </ul> <p><b>6. <i>Coaching of project managers</i></b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Focus on planning and evaluation of the project management</li> <li>• Sparring / coaching of the project manager during the project process</li> <li>• Review / audit of the management effort in the project</li> </ul> <p><b>7. <i>Assisting project management</i></b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Facilitator at organisation of introductory / start-up seminars</li> <li>• Project guides assist in the daily routine</li> <li>• Facilitator at the final evaluation of the project handling</li> </ul>
<b>Project company level</b>	<p><b>8. <i>Facilitating exchange of experiences</i></b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Rules for learning and communication concerning management of projects</li> <li>• Internal forum / network for project managers and other involved</li> <li>• Participation in seminars / symposia – prepare and give lectures</li> </ul> <p><b>9. <i>Project managers' career path</i></b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Certification as lever for competence development</li> <li>• Ensure status via formal career path for project managers</li> </ul> <p><b>10. <i>Changing company organisation</i></b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Project office as initiator and support for advanced handling</li> </ul> <p><b>11. <i>Advancing portfolio management</i></b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Prepare the scope of project orientation in the company</li> <li>• Visualisation of all projects incl. the anchoring</li> <li>• Prepare priority and reporting of the projects</li> <li>• Management pro-active role as to the projects</li> </ul> <p><b>12. <i>Evaluating effect of PM advancement</i></b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Systematic estimate of short and long term effects</li> </ul>

In general we recommend to apply a *broad range of focus areas / methods* – to facilitate that the requested advancement also takes place in the practical exercise of project management. However, we have learned from experience that the effect is increased if the advancement process has focus on *achieving selected advancements*.

Further, we recommend that all processes are closely *linked to the management of specific projects* and project portfolios – and that a stepwise process takes place anchored in and based on visible results and achieved effects

The following sections advice on how to practice each of the other 11 focus areas / methods.

### **Anchoring the advancement process**

It is important with an anchoring upwards and outwards in the organisation to achieve a real impact of the advancement process.

Concerning the *managerial anchoring upwards* it is a question whether it basically is a management responsibility to develop the competencies of the organisation. The management must ask for advancements – you get what you go for and control.

However, it is not that simply to achieve the ownership of the management because an aiming at improved project handling typically also will intervene in the management's own concept of management. Simultaneously with a guiding role in the process the management will also become a *target group* for a development process.

A “mechanic management” of the process is not enough. Especially in the introductory phases the management must spare time for involvement in an “organic management” of the process.

It is also *useful with a broad involvement of project managers* and other key persons in the development process. This will promote real acceptance and give opportunity to practice the development. The involvement can also contribute to the training and facilitation of exchange of experiences.

The basic method is to meet both the management and the participants at their current level – and to visualise which values an improved project management will present.

A practical method is to create *involvement via seminars* that may function as a visible backbone in the development process – and also has proved to be a suitable method for encouraging managers and resource persons to accept ownership in the process.

### **Clarifying need for PM improvements**

It is hardly breaking news that it is useful to describe the need or problem that has triggered the company to initiate advanced management of projects. Anyway, it is surprising how little effort has been made to clarify the requirement – before more specific methods are applied.

During the requirement clarification it is essential to clarify *importance* of the advancement process in the company. Has advanced project management

- any strategic consequence for which tasks the company can handle,
- any tactical consequence for improved handling of the specific project
- or has it operational consequence – in line with other skills?

Typically, the company management, the project managers and project participants are well aware of the problem and know what should be done. Good project management is simply systematised common sense! The challenge is to do what we know is “right” and to drop “wrong” conduct! *To make common sense common practice!*

A broad participation and a brief wording of what is already common knowledge could result in advanced projects.

A more *systematic evaluation of the maturity* concerning management of projects can be made based on the 31 method competencies as described in the “Danish National Competence Baseline”. How professional is the management and is advancement needed? You can find the answer by clarifying your present stage – and the need for improvements. Or the evaluation could be made by use of the 10-step scale as described in the book.

A precondition for an application of this method is that the user has knowledge of the range of methods for project management.

It is further recommended as part of a requirement clarification to record examples on *best practice* for application of methods and tools in project management. This will specify the clarification of requirement and possibilities - and facilitate the anchoring.

### **Developing project management methods**

Choosing the proper level for the methods of project handling is an important task. The optimal for the users is that the methods with descriptions are both briefly and very specific – but also applicable in general across projects. Requirements that hardly can be fulfilled!

One solution could be to prepare guidelines for the entire company with focus on principles and rules – and also with focus on most important improvement areas.

For example, if it is accepted that the project start-up should remain an improvement area you could apply the principle that a project start-up seminar always should be organised in case of projects with some complexity / size. Another principle could be that the project owner should participate in the beginning and/or the end of the seminar as a minimum.

As a starting point for a profound *description of the methods* we recommend a graduation compared with the relevant management effort in the specific project. Distinguish for example between management concepts A, B, C.

Methods in *electronic concept* seem to break down former barriers for applying the methods from the fine ring binders in the company

Another tendency may be that the companies refrain from preparing an extensive "tool box" for project management. An alternative could be a simple project management model with references and links to recommended methods in literature and good examples in the company i.e. to establish project guidelines based on the existing knowledge.

The 31 method competencies in the "Danish National Competence Baseline" can be used as a "rack" for such a simple guidelines that mainly consists of references and links.

One of the advantages is an easier maintenance – compared with an internal, coherent "tool box". Another advantage is an almost free upgrading via new editions of external literature.

### **Training project personnel**

Courses are the classic operation area – many development processes in the companies are started in this forum. However, the effect of such courses is sometimes *surprisingly modest*.

This seems especially to be the case with open, external courses. Unrealistic expectations could be one reason – a three-day course with test of a great number of methods do not enable the participants to a free juggling in own projects with all the methods.

It is difficult on your own to put the course learning into practical project handling!

As assessor at certification of project managers this is quite obvious.

The recommendations are to *link training activities with practical project management* as much as possible. Especially at the initiation of projects such possibilities are favourable.

It could also be stimulating if *demand for practising is raised* at courses / training of project management and / or if an examination takes place.

The effect of the training activities can be increased by designing internal courses based on an extensive requirement specification – both concerning topics and scope of learning.

Once more we refer to the "Danish National Competence Baseline" which could be applied for selection of important topics – and also be used to indicate the scope of learning on the 10-step scale. This includes the training process in general – but could also be practised for the individual participant.

## Coaching of project managers

A supplement – or alternative – to the training process is that the individual project manager has a coach or a sparring partner. We use the term coach if the aim primarily is to develop the competencies of the project manager - and the term sparring if the aim primarily is to improve a current management effort .

In both cases the aim is to assist the project manager in applying his common sense!

As a pivot for coaching or sparring process we recommend that the project manager prepares a formal planning and evaluation of own management effort.

As starting point a formal review of the project manager's effort has character of control, which might be useful. We all have a tendency to produce what is demanded. Depending on how the review is initiated it could just as well serve as a structured coaching or sparring process.

As a possible method for coaching / sparring / reviews we refer once more to the "Danish National Competence Baseline" – both the method and the behaviour competencies.

## Assisting project management

Further, to advance the levels the project management could be offered specific assistance at the more challenging stages of a project process. The assistance could take place at two levels:

- *Advising* or assistance for solution of project management tasks – e.g. preparation of risk analyses, an entire project basis, or a status report.
- *Facilitation* of the co-operation process at challenging stages – e.g. at organisation of the project start-up seminar or closedown seminar / meeting.

Assistance in connection with initiation of a project is also a matter of communicating experiences, while the "clay is soft" and it still might be possible to select an alternative approach than previously used for management of projects!

Another important task for the assistance is to make us stop and create a forum for focus and peace that can lead to learning and later be utilised.

The assistance could be given ad hoc between the project managers – or by internal or external consultants.

## Facilitating exchange of experiences

Now we have reached the "learning organisation" or "knowledge management" concerning management of projects. The ultimate dream is that it becomes a culture for the company that the project managers communicate gained learning – and that new knowledge on project management is looked up when needed. However, this is seldom the case in a hectic everyday life, where the current challenges in the projects take all attention and even more.

Typically, specific "mechanism" is required to ensure that the communication of experiences takes place. At company level a *project forum / internal network* could be useful if somebody ensures the intensity and profit of the specific sessions.

A way of facilitating the profit is to stipulate that each participant formally *plans and evaluates own management effort* – as a combined logbook and activity plan for the project management. At the network meetings the project managers give sparring to each other in turn based on the logbook / activity plan. This ensures a more specific dialogue and is experienced more relevant than a free exchange of experiences.

*Registration* for certification in project management can also serve as a vehicle for both a continued activity and an intensified network between the project managers.

## Project managers' career path

A formalised career path for the project managers is a method to prevent good project managers to run

away from the company. A career path can also "serve as a vehicle" for advancing the level of project management.

This is done by making project management a *visible discipline* in the organisation. In addition, for each career level requirements as to competence levels must be worded. Once more, we refer to the "Danish National Competence Baseline" as a method.

A method to support and create respect for a career path is to apply IPMA's four-level certification programme. The certification process serves as a lever for competence development and also gives a paper of competence levels.

### **Changing company organisation**

A formalisation of the career path also implies an adjustment of the company organisation. Between other organisational changes could be mentioned a *selection of project chiefs* to attend to projects within the respective areas – and an introduction of programme management to ensure that the requested, long-term profit of a bulk of projects is reached.

Recent years have shown a tendency in large organisations to establish project management offices as centre of excellence to support the whole range of advancing project management.

### **Advancing portfolio management**

Concerning projects within the company's core area the portfolio management is typically under control. Concerning internal development projects or cross-sectional, strategically aiming the portfolio management is often a distinct "area of improvement".

The rule of the thumb is that it is most practicable first to advance the levels for project management – and then improve portfolio management later.

### **Evaluating effect of PM advancement**

As a final method we recommend to make a *periodical evaluation of the achieved level for management of projects*. Do we practice the stipulated improvements? As mentioned – we get what we can control.

Of course, it is more interesting if we achieve the *requested, long-term effects* - in relation to the company's clients, its management and employees. The evaluation is not only a re-active control at a time when all resources have been used. It is a pro-active method for keeping up spirit in a development process that might shrink in some periods.

### **Successful advancing of project management**

It is a company management task to initiate advancement processes as to management of projects in the company and to organise and control the aiming.

Part of this task is to *find time* for project owners, project managers, and project participants to incorporate the requested competencies. The effect of many good course processes could for example be minimised because training of new methods and improved conduct has not been possible in a hectic everyday life simultaneously with the course.

It is also a management task to make the *changes of own methods and own conduct* that are required to achieve the requested advancement of project management and project culture.

But it is also important to stress that advanced management of project is a joint responsibility for all the involved in the specific project. As project owner, project manager or project participant you should not only be competent to handle your tasks "as usually". You must also be *competent* to contribute to an ongoing advancement process!