

## &gt; METHODS

# Aligning the teams

More than seventy cross-national project teams in the European Commission's Innovation Programme have applied GOPP planning workshops to stay on track

Projects are one of the most common forms of achieving specific goals, and have even been promoted as an effective way of (re)structuring many organisations in today's fluid and ever-changing situations. Complex problems can often be solved with the judicious use of expertise from different departments of a large organisation. Organisations which work across national boundaries often chose project structures as a way of achieving cross-fertilisation and tackling problems which would be too expensive or even impossible to deal with through regular organisational structures. The European Commission, and in particular the Innovation programme of Directorate-General XIII has devoted considerable time and effort into developing ways of assisting cross-national and joint industry project teams to achieve better results.

Since 1991, a number of DG XIII programmes have used goal-or result-oriented project planning in participative workshops to help projects improve the quality of their work. Project management and participants in such workshops have consistently reported that this approach is very useful in easing the difficult task of working across national and organisational boundaries.

## Problems project management face

Project teams face a number of problems which cannot be solved by traditional project management methods, which historically have focused on the "downstream" part of project implementation: namely, the efficient organisation, monitoring and feedback of project activities.



Although there are many tools and techniques for project management, most provide tools based in some way on Critical Path methods or PERT-type analysis of activities. Through the careful definition and tracking of specific activities, it is hoped that a project manager will be aware of delays in the actions of the team and be able to respond in time to delays and shortfalls in performance. These tools are widely known and have been used in many, complex projects. They are known to be effective in some cases, but to require considerable effort in setting up the project plan and in keeping track of project activities.

## Problem 1: Differences in interests and goals

A different approach to project planning focuses "upstream" on the *decision making process* around the common goals of projects. In joint industry projects, where the different members of the project team report back to and represent the (legitimate) and sometimes conflicting interests of their own home organisations, traditional planning methods often miss their mark. Downstream project planning systems assume that a project team is a homogeneous and organic unity. The system works if the project manager has the mandate to influence the priority which different team members give to achieving their targets. However, it is well known that matrix structures in organisations often cause difficulties as the different project leaders and hierarchical heads of department fight for priority to be given to their own activities. The limited time available to most team members in today's busy world often means that someone will lose this battle.

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### **Problem 2: Cultural norms and values**

In cross-national projects, the differences in cultural norms and values and the long lines of communication with few opportunities for face-to-face contacts often work against project unity. Although every member of the team may agree in principle on the need to get the job done, the principle “out of sight, out of mind” often leads to delays. There are, of course, also big differences, even between European countries, in the value given to “an agreement”. For some, “my word is my bond”, for others, “there are many ways to Rome”.

In joint industry projects, or projects which involve public and private sector, research institutions and manufacturing concerns, consultants or intermediary organisations etc., there are also the problems of differing *organisational* cultures.

Innovation projects are by definition always projects in which different organisational cultures clash. Innovation happens because of the confrontation between the differ-

ing organisations. Cross-national, innovation projects, such as those which receive support from European funding, face many difficulties even though all the partners are of good will and see the immense value of such an approach to innovation.

### **Problem 3: Differences in understanding**

Almost any joint industry project suffers from the fact that one (sometimes two) of the partners are much further in their thinking and understanding of the subject of co-operation. They have developed the idea, or have at least developed their own understanding of the need for the project. And partners who join the project as it comes to the stage of implementation are at a different stage in their own thinking.

This applies of course to the actual members of a project team, but more importantly it applies to the people whom they must (continue to) convince within their home organisation. These decision makers operate from a totally different set of priorities and interests. It is therefore not uncommon to find that one of

the project partners may in the course of time change its policy regarding a project, giving it lower priority or even cancelling participation altogether.

### **Problem 4: Relinquishing control**

For the initiator of the project, there is often also the difficulty of “giving up” the ownership. A joint industry project is only successful when it meets all the legitimate interests of all the partners, and this requires the initiators to give way and adapt their own goals and targets.

The other partners in the project have a similar problem. They do not control the project, its direction and its outcomes, since the initiator has already made many decisions regarding the project design. Few projects begin with a truly blank sheet of paper. For those partners who join the project later on, there is a legitimate concern that the project may fail to benefit their own organisation sufficiently. They may also feel that they will be unable to influence the project's di-

rection sufficiently. If the initiator is a powerful player in the field, they may naturally be concerned that the main interests served will be those of the initiator.

### **Problem 5: Limited mandates**

The problem of relinquishing control is compounded by the fact that each person who attends a project meeting usually does not have a complete mandate for decision-making regarding that project. He/she must work within the limitations placed on him/her by the own organisation. Sometimes this means that participants will “play safe” and seek the lowest common denominator, instead of the higher risk and challenging options in project design.

For everyone, including the person representing the initiating partner in the project, there is always the question of how to “sell” the decisions back in the home organisation. Projects have different importance to different partners, and must compete for resources (manpower, possibly money, and often also intellectual property).

A successful project involv-

## **Overview**

Cross-national and joint industry projects face a number of project management problems which cannot easily be solved with traditional project management systems and tools. The authors have extensive experience in the development and application of participative workshop methods for projects carried out with financial assistance from the European Commission. Responses to these workshops by project partners is very positive, both in terms of the efficiency of such an approach in achieving clear agreements among the partners on specific targets and deliverables as well as effectiveness in aligning the partners and their organisations towards common goals and objectives. The role of independent facilitators in this process as well as the requirements on effective workshop procedures is also discussed.

ing many partners always requires trade-offs, which may not be within the mandate of the individuals in the meeting. And without very clear project outputs and benefits, it is difficult to convince the home organisation of the value and necessity for wholehearted participation.

**Problem 6: Different legitimate interests**

Finally, any team which meets to design a plan or decide on action suffers from the human propensity to avoid conflict and to communicate ineffectively. These problems are always present in team-work (and thus in project work). Many teams never realise their full potential and remain working groups of individuals, each striving to achieve their own goals and targets. Unless a common work product is agreed on, and the team commits to achieving more together than they would achieve by working separately, then the cost of investing time and effort in the project work will outweigh the benefits. In cross-national teams, different styles of communication often cause uncertainty on what is being discussed or even on what has been agreed. A lot can be lost in the "translation" of the results of project team work back in the home organisation.

**What is needed**

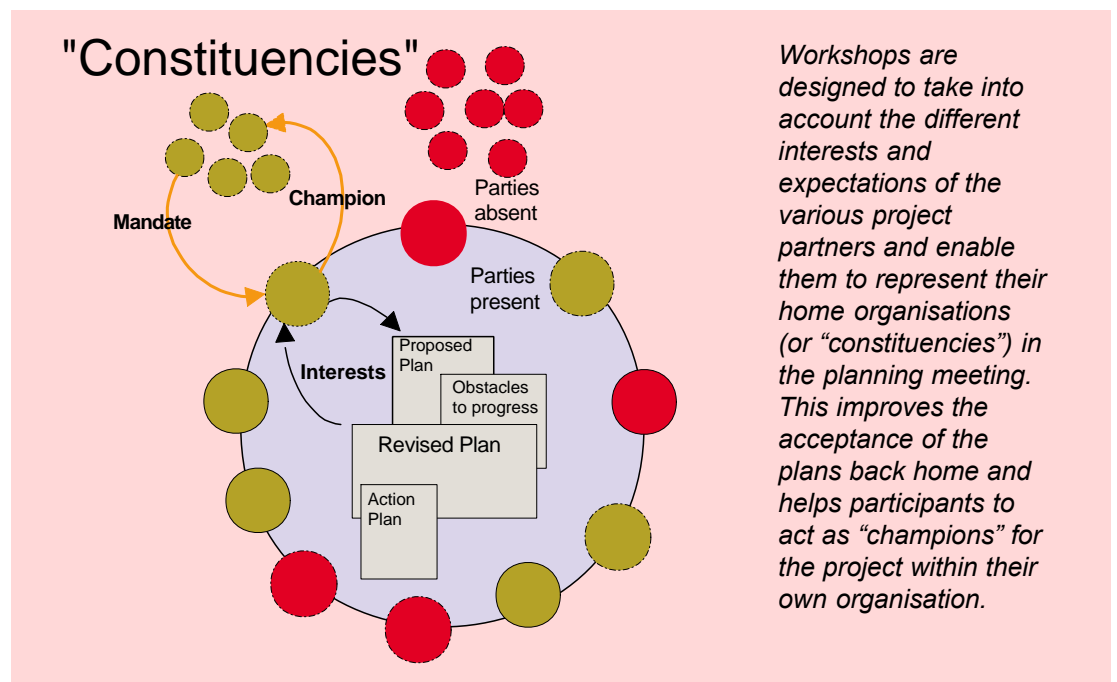
Methods which focus on the planning of activities will never solve these kinds of problems. Instead, what is needed is:

- common understanding of the legitimate interests of

- the different project partners,
- clarity on the mandates of the actual team participants to make decisions and commit their home organisation (their "constituency"),
- agreement on goals and objectives which have sufficient "added value" for all

lems mentioned above, enabling the project leader and the partners to overcome these initial difficulties. It is based on a planning method known as Objective or Goal-Oriented Project Planning (GOPP).

A typical workshop takes as its starting point the existing proposals or plans which



*Workshops are designed to take into account the different interests and expectations of the various project partners and enable them to represent their home organisations (or "constituencies") in the planning meeting. This improves the acceptance of the plans back home and helps participants to act as "champions" for the project within their own organisation.*

- the parties,
- clarity on the role which each party will play and the demands which will be made on their organisation to achieve these goals,
- concrete agreements on the deliverables, the timing of these, and the responsibility for achieving these.

Only in this way can project team members become the champions of their project in their respective constituencies.

The participative planning workshop developed and used widely within the Innovation programme of the European Commission is designed to address the prob-

lems mentioned above, enabling the project leader and the partners to overcome these initial difficulties. It is based on a planning method known as Objective or Goal-Oriented Project Planning (GOPP). A typical workshop takes as its starting point the existing proposals or plans which have been presented to the Commission for support. Although the plans have been prepared with all the partners in mind, often only the leading partner has a clear idea of all the details of the proposed project. Sometimes, the project planning workshop is the first opportunity for all of the partners to meet face-to-face and discuss the plans.

The GOPP approach also allows plans to be critically reviewed by the partnership, to ensure that they are complete and that risks have been accounted for. This quality check enables projects to improve their chance of achiev-

- AGENDA**
1. Expectations
  2. Proposed Plan
  3. Obstacles
  4. Risks
  5. Measures
  6. Plan of Action

**A hallmark of this approach is the enhanced confidence which the participants have in the project.**

ing their goals.

### Workshop agenda

Each workshop has its own agenda, based on the specific needs of a project, and agreed between the neutral facilitator who conducts the workshop and the project management. A typical agenda is as follows:

- Opening, sharing expectations from the workshop, fixing the agenda
- Reviewing the expectations, contributions and roles of the partners
- Presenting the proposed plan, using the Logical Framework<sup>1</sup> matrix
- Examining possible obstacles to project success or other concerns and issues of the participants
- Determining deliverables needed by the end of the initial Definition Phase of the project (in which feasibility checking takes place and the plans are finalised)
- Checking the logic of the plan in detail, especially the Outputs of project activities, the activities which should deliver these outputs and the external risk factors
- Determining Objectively Verifiable Indicators of success for the Project objective and for the individual Outputs
- Agreeing on responsibilities for Outputs and activities and the organisational structure of the project including its management and decision-making structure
- Developing a Plan of Action

for the Definition Phase.

A workshop used to formulate a project usually takes between one-and-a-half and two-and-a-half days to complete.

### Neutral Facilitators

The workshop is conducted by a neutral facilitator. He/she applies the planning procedures and enables effective communication and transparency in decision-making. The facilitator does not interfere with the content of the discussions, but acts as a “mirror” to ensure understanding and help to focus the discussion, leading to an efficient meeting.

An outside facilitator is used because the project management needs to be free to participate fully in the discussions. If the project leader takes the role of conducting the meeting, it is difficult to separate content interventions from procedural or group interventions. And experience has shown that this often leads to inefficiency in such initial discussions.

The facilitator is also aware of the planning procedures followed, and can enable the group to avoid becoming stuck in an early stage of the planning process.

Experienced project managers often comment on the value of using an external facilitator in these rather diffi-

cult initial discussions. Participants generally state their satisfaction with the amount of ground which can be covered in this way.

### Results of workshops

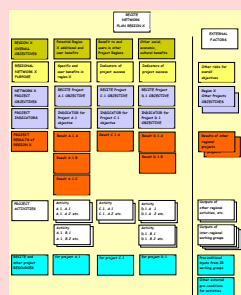
More than 70 workshops carried out in this way have proven the value of the participative approach to project planning.

The meetings are efficient, producing concrete agreements which the partners fully understand and can present to their home organisations. Difficult issues have been confronted and solutions have been found, or the risk has been judged acceptable.

Confidence in the project is also greater when tackled in this way. The interests and expectations of partners have been made explicit and accepted by the other participants as legitimate. Conflicting interests have been examined and acceptable ways of dealing with these have been agreed. The concerns which any partner naturally feels at the start of a project have been brought to the surface and specific steps to resolve these have been taken.

There are clear agreements on the project's Outputs, on the Indicators for success, and on the Risks. It is known who will be responsible for each part of the project and what the role of each partner is to be.

Finally, there are concrete steps for immediate action to finalise the plans and present them to own management and to the Commission for final approval.



<sup>1</sup> Logical Framework is an underlying planning method used in GOPP workshops. It establishes the hierarchy of objectives and activities which will ensure project achievement of the goals and accounts for risks due to external factors.