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PROJECT
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BY: STEVEN GOEMAN

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NAME YOUR PROJECT PHASES WISELY!

CONSIDER APPROPRIATE & TELLING NAMES FOR THE PHASES OF YOUR PROJECT

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PROJECT LIFECYCLES AND THEIR PHASES: WHAT ARE THEY ?

In order for us to understand what a project phase really is, we need to start with understanding what a project lifecycle is, and where better to start than with the **Project Management Body of Knowledge (PMBOK) guide**!

The PMBOK-guide, sixth edition, confronts us in **chapter 1, on page 19** with the project lifecycle concept, where we can literally read:

"A project lifecycle is the series of phases that a project passes through from its start to its completion."

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On **page 20** of the same edition of the PMBOK-guide, one can find the definition of a project phase, being:

"A collection of logically related project activities that culminates in the completion of one or more deliverables.”

They also claim that these phases are generally given names that indicate **the type of work done** in that phase. As examples of good phase names, the Project Management Institute refers to "Concept", "Development", "Design", "Test", "Transition", "Commissioning", and so on.

WHY ARE THE NAMES OF THESE PROJECT PHASES SO IMPORTANT TO SPEND A PROJECT MANAGEMENT ARTICLE ON IT ?

It is all about communication! And we all know how important communication is within our beloved project management discipline.

As the project management lifecycle, but also the project delivery lifecycle is your main decomposition structure of your timeline, it can be used a lot as a **structure for your project communications**.

Think about presenting the timeline of your project in a simple way of five steps (or let us call them immediately "phases"), which can also be easily graphically presented. Or think about avoiding to have to explain what your project currently tries to realize, without having to write-up long texts or books to provide the necessary context.

Working with a good structured project lifecycle and paying attention to the naming of the phases, you can actually optimize and simplify your communication about the project by using the lifecycle as a framework in each communication.

When using the project lifecycles to structure your communication, you need to ensure a few things:

1.

The number of phases at the first level, i.e. at the level of the project management lifecycle, should be kept to a **minimum**. Typically five phases will be more than enough to express the major sequential blocks of project activities. An example is:

Starting > Designing > Realizing > Transferring, and > Closing.

2.

You need to keep the project management lifecycle as **simple** as possible. Non-project professionals should understand its purpose and explaining that purpose becomes quite difficult when the project management lifecycle on itself is very complex.

Together with the understanding of the purpose of the project lifecycle, the simplicity of the project lifecycle should also help to make the structure of your communication as easy as possible.

3.

You have to introduce and to explain the project lifecycle and its phases as **from the beginning** of the project and to all stakeholders of the project. **Not only** the project team members!

Everybody that at one time will relate to a larger or a lesser extent, with the project, needs to understand the phases of the project. So, here you already have a first subject for your project kick-off meeting!

4.

And, last but not least, the names of the phases need to be "**telling**". The names should immediately reveal what the work planned in that particular phase will be about. Therefore it is crucial to give a simple but clear name to each phase so that it becomes immediately clear what kind of work is performed in that specific phase.

For example: when you have grouped all work related to setting-up your project in the first weeks after project approval, you could call that phase "Initiation", but you could as well call that phase "Project Set-Up". The second option probably better captures the scope of work than the first one. It still needs explanation, but the name "Project Set-Up" already better conveys the message.

HOW TO MAKE THE PROJECT PHASE NAMES "TELLING" ?

As already stated above, according to the Project Management Institute, a project phase is a collection of logically related project activities that culminates in the completion of one or more deliverables.

From that definition, it is clear that the phase names should be **activity driven or oriented**.

Nevertheless, you can also consider to relate the name of your phases to the (main) deliverables that are created, rather than to refer to the activities that are performed. Especially in an agile approach, naming the phases or the sprints to the created minimum viable product is worthwhile to consider.

Anyways, when considering the names of the project phases, there are a few questions that you need to answer:

- What kind of activities (or deliverables) are performed (or created) during the phase ?

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- What is the terminology that is commonly used in the organization where the project is performed in ? Performing a project on an airport will use different terminology than on a project which is performed in a young ICT start-up company !
- What is the subject matter of the project ? A building construction project will use a different language than a process re-engineering project...
- What is the language of the project stakeholders ? And don't think (only) about "English", "Dutch" and "French", but reflect especially on the fact that an accountant uses other terminology than somebody standing at the production lines...

Keeping these simple questions at the back of our mind, let me give you some do's and don'ts to make your project phase names as telling as possible.

Do 1. Do not use the process groups
The first do is actually a don't!

Please, at all times, avoid making the mistake to use PMI's process groups as they are defined in the PMBOK!
Both the process groups and project lifecycle concepts are often mingled together, but they shouldn't. See my other article on that matter.

To not contribute to that confusion, it is recommended not to use the names of the process groups, like Initiating, Planning, Executing and Closing, as names for the phases of your project lifecycle.

It can be very tempting though... As mentioned above, a first typical phase is to organize all those activities related to starting-up the project. It might sound logic then, to call that phase the "Initiation phase". But I believe it is better to call that phases something else, like "Starting-up phase", "Pre-project phase", "Approving the project phase", or whatever name suits you best to use in your communications to the stakeholders
and that expresses which kind of activities will be performed.

Do 2. Use a verb in the phase name

A second "do" to give your project phases a decent name is to use a verb in its name. From the definition of PMI, we know now that phases are a collection of related activities. Typically an activity is expressed with a verb.

Therefore, using verbs make the phases sounding "action driven", and in fact, they should be as a project phase is after all a collection of tasks to be performed (see also PMI's definition above).

A good naming for our generic project management lifecycle would then become something like for example:

> Starting-up the project > Conceptualize the project > Realize the project > Handing-over the project result > Close the project

Do 3. Keep the project phase names as short as possible

As you want to use the project lifecycle in a lot of communications and especially visual representations, it is good to keep the name of the phase, as short as possible.

You can do that by using **verb related** wording. The above example could be reduced to something like:

> Starting-up > Conceptualizing > Realizing > Handing-over > Closing

Do 4. Focus on the deliverables when sub-decomposing the project management lifecycle

This fourth "do" might sound a little bit conflicting with my previous recommendations. But, when further decomposing the project management lifecycle into the project delivery life cycle, you might want to switch to using nouns as to indicate the major deliverable or deliverables that will be the outcome of these sub-phases.

In the end, a project delivery lifecycle will be more specific deliverable driven and unique to the project at hand.

Do 5. Introduce the PLC at the project Kick-Off meeting

Introduce and explain the project lifecycle and its phases during the kick-off meeting. I like to make it a "reveal" moment as to give it some weight and to draw the attention to it. Especially when using the short version of the names, an explanation is needed.

Do 6. Use the PLC as a status reporting structure

Include the project management lifecycle as a reporting structure in your recurrent status meetings. For example by using the "end of phase" milestones in your milestone chart, or by using a visual representation of the project life cycle to indicate the "now" point.

The repetition of the PLC in the recurrent status updates will make that stakeholders will get used to the project phases, reducing the need for explaining the context where the project is in and therefore optimizing the efficiency of your communications.

Do 7. In Agile projects, use the minimum viable products as the phase name

I am perhaps repeating myself, but in an agile approach, don't use the activities to define the name of a phase or a sprint, but refer to the deliverable, being the minimum viable product.

During the realization of an Agile project, the sprints are your phases. It can be interesting to include the project team members in giving a specific name for the next sprint. A fun activity as part of the sprint planning meetings.

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Steven GOEMAN is a certified project management professional and a licensed Master of Neurolinguistic Programming with more than 20 years of project (management) experience. He is the creative mind behind the renowned brand "**The Project Management Mentor**", enabling him to share his expertise on portfolio management, program management and project management as an empathic project management coach and project management mentor.

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