

Orchestrating success

By David Hillson, The Risk Doctor

The PMI New Zealand Chapter recently held their 16th annual conference at the Westpac Stadium in Wellington, an impressive venue for major sporting events and concerts. The conference theme was 'Orchestrating success in projects and business', and the programme featured a wide variety of musical entertainment, as well as excellent papers and good social events (see <http://www.pminzconference.com/>).

But if 'orchestrating success in projects and business' is the goal, how do we define 'success'? For an orchestra, this involves three elements:

1. First they have to fulfil the composer's intention faithfully and completely.
2. Second the orchestra needs to perform well technically, both as individuals and together.
3. And third they must entertain the audience, meeting or exceeding their expectations.

Each of these measures of success has a parallel in the world of projects. We only succeed if we meet the vision of the project sponsor as defined in the business case, project charter or contract. The performance of the project team is also important, executing their project management skills individually and together. And we only ultimately succeed if we deliver value and benefits to customers, users and other project stakeholders.

Now we know what 'success' means, who should be 'orchestrating' it? Someone is needed who can address all three aspects of success, relating to the project sponsor, the project team and the project customers. In an orchestra it is the conductor who is responsible for understanding the composer's intentions, leading the orchestra to perform well, and staying aware of the audience. In a project this role is played by the project manager, balancing the needs of all project stakeholders to make sure that the project succeeds.

But is a conductor really needed? Wouldn't it be possible simply to give a musical score to a group of skilled musicians and let them play for the audience? Isn't the conductor an unnecessary overhead, an extra person at the front who doesn't actually play an instrument or make any music? To the uninitiated, the conductor looks like an optional extra as he ineffectually waves his baton while the players do the real work. Sometimes it may be possible to do without a conductor, especially if the music is simple, or if the orchestra is very skilled and used to playing together or if the audience are easily pleased. But usually the conductor has

a very important role in keeping all the players on time, coming in at the right moment, playing in harmony and balance, starting and ending together. In fact the one time during the performance when a conductor is really important is if things start to go wrong. If the players lose their place, or get out of time then the conductor needs to step in and manage the variations, correct and recover any errors, and get the piece back on track so that it ends successfully. This sounds a lot like risk management of course!

'Orchestrating success in projects and business' compares the project team to an orchestra playing a piece of music for an audience using a predefined score with a conductor leading the way. But there are other ways in which the musical metaphor can reveal interesting aspects of project work. For example musical groups come in all sizes, from simple duo to massed military band. In a smaller group there may be no separate conductor, but instead one of the players takes the lead and the rest follow. Sometimes there are one or more soloists who have a key part at the front, with others in support. In jazz there is usually no written score, just an overall shape or intention, with musicians taking turns to innovate and improvise within the agreed framework. All music-making requires players to listen to each other and communicate clearly, creating harmony and rhythm through the interplay of their various parts. Some modern music makes heavy use of technology to supplement or enhance the skills of the players, with less live performance. Musical tastes have changed over the years, and new trends and styles emerge with each new generation.

Each of these musical analogies can be explored as pictures of how projects might work in practice, revealing useful insights to inform what we do. The important thing of course is not the metaphor but the reality. Does it help us to compare projects with musical performances? What are the implications?

Returning to where we started with the 'orchestrating success' theme, the three elements of success for an orchestra leave us with three clear challenges as project professionals and practitioners:

1. We must be clear about why we are doing our project. The sponsor's vision is the project's reason for existence, and we must understand it and test ourselves against it regularly. Where project objectives are conflicting, incomplete or unclear, we need to go back to our project sponsor to clarify what is required and why. Project success depends on knowing what we're aiming to achieve.
2. Each project practitioner should take responsibility for developing and maintaining their skills and competence. We need to be continual learners, honing our abilities to become the best that we can be. We should aim to master the fundamentals of our discipline so that we can execute our project efficiently and professionally. It will be harder for our projects to succeed if we are not fully competent.
3. Everything we do in our projects needs to deliver value and benefits to project stakeholders. They are the purpose of the project, and should be the touchstone of progress and success. Our role as project practitioners is to dedicate ourselves to creating value for our customers, users and other stakeholders. If we're not doing that through our project then why would we bother?

The PMI New Zealand annual conference was very successful, with about 500 delegates enjoying the technical papers and the musical interludes, as well as experiencing some of the delights of Wellington. The conference theme of 'Orchestrating success in projects and business' provided a helpful set of images to explore important aspects of project management, giving delegates new insights into their profession. Each one of us involved in projects should be sure that we understand our sponsor's vision, that we have the skills required to perform to a high standard, and that everything we do delivers value. Only then will we be able to play our proper part in orchestrating success.



About the author

Known globally as The Risk Doctor, Dr David Hillson PMP HonFAPM FIRM is director of Risk Doctor & Partners (www.risk-doctor.com). David is recognised internationally as a leading thinker and expert practitioner in risk management at both strategic and project levels, and he writes and speaks widely on the topic. He is active in the Project Management Institute (PMI) and received the PMI Distinguished Contribution Award for his work in developing risk management over many years. He is also an Hon. Fellow of the UK Association for Project Management (APM), and a Fellow of the Institute of Risk Management (IRM).

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