



APM web briefing - What do you do when every project is a priority one project?

Introduction

Using a prioritisation matrix, at least two projects show as having "number one" priority, and the projects can't be run in parallel as the teams aren't exclusive. What do you do?

Look at the decision making process

If two projects are prioritised as being number one, consideration needs to be given to the analysis on which the decision was taken. For example are the parameters in the prioritisation matrix right and are they aligned to strategic priorities.

A prioritisation matrix should show what to prioritise against e.g. cost, benefit, risk, strategic alignment. It should also show how to measure them against these areas and the prioritisation method i.e. 1, 2, 3 etc. or even better, 1a and 1b, 2a and 2b etc.

There are occasions when two or more projects will come out as top priority but no two projects are the same in terms of duration, return on investment, risk management, inputs, outputs, duration and cost. Therefore they cannot have exactly the same priority. While all factors should be considered, not all can be exactly the same in terms of importance. Therefore, think about risk management and agree a strategy which identifies the parameters that are high, medium and low.

Make a decision

Make a decision based on sound reasoning – there cannot be two priority ones! To half-do two projects is to plan for total failure.

No assessment or prioritisation matrix will answer all your questions. The best an assessment tool can ever do is tell you how good the option would have been if it was finished yesterday. Used properly they provide valuable insight and guidance but eventually someone has to actually decide what the best route to take is. Whatever the books say, it falls to you, the project manager, to decide.

Checking which project has the higher/quicker return on investment is a good starting point, as long as this is a priority for your company, as is finding out what are the impact and risks of placing a project second.

Some other things to consider would include:

- Can we re-plan these projects together and divide up the work differently to be more efficient?
- Which is cheaper to do?
- Which is more urgent?
- Which will have the biggest impact if you don't do it?
- Which will have the biggest approval from the stakeholders if you do it first?
- Which project are other things more dependent on?
- Which is closest to delivering the strategy?
- Find out what the impact and risks are of placing a project second. Choose the one with the least impact and manage the impact of setting it as second priority.

Involve others

In the mind of the client all projects are of the highest priority, but that doesn't mean you can't make your own decision. However, don't leave your client in the dark or you will be heading for a serious confrontation. Be up front and act quickly.

You need to let your client know what's happening and how you propose to manage the issues. If he's smart he'll know that he has to help you find a compromise to create a win/win scenario. No client wants to risk failure, so they are often more open to a compromise than you might think. Projects are not just entities that have goals, budgets, parameters etc. they are about people. Talk to the people involved and see if you can renegotiate one of the priority one projects or discuss possible flexibilities in their priorities.

A key element is to try and show some continuing progress as inevitably there will be other external factors which impact on your plans and also the overall objectives of the projects. When there is more than one top priority it can be because the original timescale of one or the other were unrealistic and will almost certainly change so be ready to act by having mitigating measures in place and keep people informed.

If the two projects are for the same client then there may be someone within the management chain who can direct the decision. In this case identify a sponsor or senior decision maker who is common to both projects. They can also help you manage the stakeholders who need to be able to see the common goals and the importance of resetting one party's priority.

If the projects are for different customers or companies they may be upset because you may have over-committed or are under-resourced. When managing two companies - admit the conflict, you may be lucky; one party might concede their need to be secondary.

If neither will, you may have to accept that one is likely to be upset whatever you do. Therefore, make a decision based on your perception of the long-term impact it will have on you.

Manage the decision

Turning a problem into a success is always part of the challenge. Clients need to trust you because losing trust is the worst thing you can do - so, play it straight and communicate. Your client might not like it, but you need to act honestly, so they can report your honesty onto their customers and clients.

When you have gone through the risks, prioritised, assessed the return on investment and everything else, it is the responsibility of the project manager to present the options to the managing board. This may be the programme board, a divisional board or even the main board. This is a skill in its own right, it's not just a case of saying "Choose A, B or C". The board needs to be shown what is least risk for best return, best use of resources, best strategic fit and so on. It may be that in identifying the options you will develop an insight that will lead to you to a preferred recommendation. However, ultimately this has to be a senior management decision and they must understand the consequences of the direction they take.

Communicate the decision to all the stakeholders so that they understand the rationale and stick to it. Achieving buy-in to an adjustment to the priority is a win/win situation all round, especially if you can ensure you'll fight for the second project to take a higher position if somehow another project comes along and tries to "jump the queue". Obviously, if the next project IS worthy of taking top priority then it's back to the negotiations drawing board again to prevent the 2nd project from losing out again!!

Putting the decisions into practice

Once the decision is made, you should carefully plan and resource the first project so you can complete it successfully, not forgetting risk management and contingency. Once that is done you may look at the other projects. Can you split the work differently to deliver some of the benefit? While doing all the priority one projects in parallel with the same limited team is probably asking for disaster, however you may be able to identify under-used resource that can make some progress on specific activities for the projects that are not chosen.

The most important bit of project prioritisation is having a gateway methodology, whereby each project is constantly assessed and reprioritised. At the start of every project, everyone's a salesman and usually an optimist, and therefore it might be that once the detailed design has been agreed, or that it is agreed the project is the right thing to do, that the world outside the project has changed e.g. new government, customer expectations, new competition or better technology.

Finally, and hopefully obviously, make sure no lower priority work is done while you have outstanding priority one projects to do: unless the resources concerned can't do anything to move the priority one projects forward.

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Web briefings

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