

Effective Project Management Controls

Free your projects by astutely controlling — not commanding — them. Here are three approaches that connect project delivery to project strategy

By M. Kathryn Brohman and Barry L. Cross

About the authors

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YOU HAVE LIKELY HEARD THE TERM COMMAND AND CONTROL — THIS leadership style evolved from military organizations where control is achieved by exercising authority and direction over an assigned group of individuals in the accomplishment of a specific goal. Command and control systems include policies, procedures, monitoring devices, and communication protocols often enabled by technology to coordinate a structured network of individuals that keep the project moving toward its goals and objectives. Unfortunately, over the past few decades the command aspects of this leadership approach have earned control a bad reputation. When one makes reference to the need for control, subordinates may translate that into a top-down, inspection-oriented approach to leadership that involves opportunism, blaming, and closed-door policies. Even the use of specific project metrics is sometimes viewed as intrusive and controlling if not managed in a constructive manner.

In most organizations, project stakeholders (such as customers, business executives, steering committees) have more authority than the project manager and ultimately decide how the project will progress. In our book, *Project Leadership: Creating Value with an Adaptive Project Organization*, we define these stakeholders as the project leadership that is ultimately responsible for effective project delivery. We believe leadership needs to be engaged and involved to help shape intentions and translate those intentions into action. Farshad Kajouii, director of Project Delivery—Field Services at Bell Canada, was given the challenge of enabling project delivery for the entire portfolio of projects in the company, and has firsthand experience with a command and control approach creating systems that are complex and onerous. When asked about the project control while speaking at a recent project seminar, he stated, “Project controls are necessary. The trick is finding a way to make sure they are helping our project teams deliver, and not forcing them through hoops that create more work and often fail to steer them in the right direction.”

When control is ineffective, project teams are “bound” by policy and procedure and leadership is “blinded” from project reality. Although many organizations demand the creation of gate reports, status information, and standardized documentation, no organization defines this as the real work. The scope of the project

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matters most, and organizations need to understand that any other work will distract project teams from the real work. Blinding occurs when project managers, especially those who are extremely passionate about the project they are working on, manipulate controls to work in their favour. Project managers call this perception management — the use of organization controls to tell the story they want leadership to hear. Why does manipulation happen? Is it the project team’s way of managing leadership? Is it a self-defense mechanism? Is it most evident among project teams that do not feel they or their projects are being dealt with fairly? This is the dark side of control, and may be more common than leadership recognizes.

So, how do we proceed from here? The concept is simple — project control is a paradox as organizations can free projects by more effectively controlling them. Some, especially those that are stuck in a command-driven control environment, may see this as a seemingly absurd or contradictory statement. The strategies presented here are well founded and true. The accompanying table provides a simple list of do’s and don’ts for popular project leadership controls.

Project Leadership Controls	Implement Controls When...	Avoid Controls When...
Detailed work decomposition (e.g., work plan, schedule)	Requirements can be identified and managed for activities that are being completed internally	Requirements are uncertain and chaotic or activities are being outsourced
Stage-gate reviews	Gates will provide teams with important feedback and guidance	Gates do not add value and projects can progress effectively without them (e.g., with projects involving single departments)
Project budget	Requirements are certain and cost estimates are well defined	Requirements and cost estimates are uncertain; break projects into segments, approving spending accordingly



Getting control right is all about balance. For example, all projects may not need to use cross-functional gate reviews, such as IT or maintenance projects limited to a single department. Effective control is all about an if-then decision; if gates will provide teams with important feedback and guidance, then apply this project

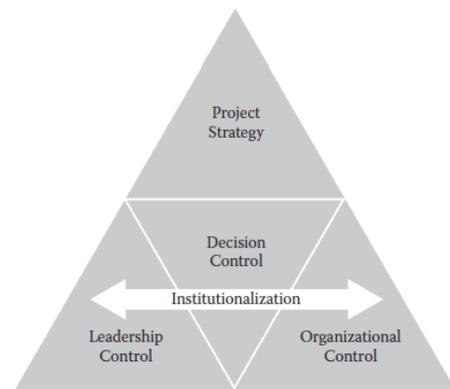
control. If not, don't. If you are one of those organizations that implemented project controls by simply forming a Project Management Office (PMO), you may have the most to gain from this article. PMOs are often rewarded by implementing more control, but more does not always mean better. PMO incentives should be grounded in implementation of the 'right' controls and they need to have responsibility for overall project delivery.

Another example is the project budget. To be clear, we are not suggesting leadership remove the project budget requirement. We are simply saying if requirements and cost estimates are uncertain, then leadership needs to consider alternative ways to manage the budget. Flexible budgeting is a more cooperative control approach where accounting is active in planning and coordinating work as opposed to simply serving as the auditor. In project environments, a common practice enabling flexible budgeting is earned value management (EVM). While EVM has its challenges, they are not because it is ineffective at managing cost in uncertain project environments, but because EVM requires a higher level of involvement with the accounting department, which can be difficult in some firms. Many organizations treat accounting as a support role, where it is not given the latitude or incentive to be involved in future business outcomes represented by these projects. To be effective, leadership needs to encourage project managers and accounting to share responsibility for managing control accounts effectively. Have you ever thought of including accounting on your responsibility matrix? A novel yet interesting idea; beware, however, as your accounting departments may resist this added degree of responsibility.

Realizing that organizational control, including a PMO, may be blinding and binding the organization's projects is the first step. The next step is to design a way to free your projects without losing sight of the fact that they need help and support to manage work, set expectations, and mitigate risk. Don't isolate them; just stop commanding them. Letting go of traditional methods of control is difficult, but necessary, if you want to avoid the paradox of control and evolve into a more mature stage of project leadership.

Establishing Effective Project Control

Establishing an improved approach to project control in organizations can be a difficult concept. Everyone agrees project controls establish a discipline toward the planning and execution of projects to achieve the desired result, yet how do organizations control projects while at the same time move away from command-driven approaches? There are three control approaches that connect project delivery to project strategy. It is your organization's challenge, or the challenge for your PMO, to come up with the right mix of controls that provide project teams with the proper balance between discipline and freedom necessary when dealing with uncertainty.



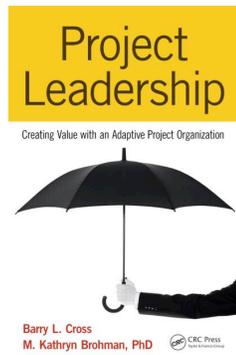
Leadership controls are those used by individual leaders to encourage cooperation and appropriate behavior among persons and groups. Each individual leader has a personalized approach to control, defined by the way he or she interacts with people, uses incentives, and leverages cultural and ideological influences to encourage people to do what requires doing. In today's environment, it is important that leadership recognize the value of control enabled through trust and respect; if a project team member trusts and respects a project leader, he or she is more likely to deliver on the commitments he or she makes. Being an effective leader is about influence rather than power. In their 2010 book *The New Psychology of Leadership: Identity, Influence and Power*, authors Haslam, Reicher, and Platow define leadership as the ability to influence beliefs, desires, and priorities. Leadership is about knowing when to use and not abuse power. True, sometimes leadership needs to encourage the organization to march to order or comply with requirements, but the essence of leadership control is knowing the difference between power and influence and understanding when each is appropriate.

Organizational controls are the systems an organization puts in place to encourage communication and coordination among individuals and groups. Communication systems enable visibility and oversight such as gate reviews, dashboards, and red, yellow, and green status indicators. Coordination systems aim to increase the efficiency and reduce the costs of executing projects. Both communication and coordination systems of control are enabled by the following:

- Policies that set organizational expectations for behaviour.
- Procedures to define how people should behave.
- Structures to assign accountability and responsibility.

Technology to enable the procedures and share information.

Decision controls provide leaders with the necessary logic to make good decisions. We have talked about gate review systems as a methodology for oversight, visibility, and control enabled through policies, procedure structures, and technology. While we discussed the go/no-go and related decisions involved in a gate review, there is another crucial element to expand on here, and that is the decision logic. When we make a decision, it is important to consider the alternatives and criteria before making that decision. Decision making can be straightforward, as viable alternatives and important criteria may be inherent in the project parameters. In many projects, however, especially highly technical projects, elements exist that rely on the expertise of project team members or outside parties. For example, some projects are required to pass through a security gate, the purpose of which is to make sure the project design and implementation comply with the organization's security infrastructure. For Internet projects, this gate would mitigate risks related to data breaches and virus attacks. As such, decision makers need the logic behind the organization's security design in order to make a responsible decision. Although responsible decision making is becoming more common in guiding technical decisions, organizations need to expand their scope of responsible decision making.



Excerpted from Project Leadership: Creating Value with an Adaptive Project Organization, by Barry L. Cross and M. Kathryn Brohman (CRC Press, 2014)

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