

Project Management in Defense – not for the Feint Hearted

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Defense projects are complex. They are delivered against rigorous requirements, inevitable time constraints and constrained budgets. Moreover, they comprise not only the Equipment outputs that generally make the headlines – the weapon, the vehicle, the helicopter, the jet, and the ship – but also the coordination of other crucial aspects that collectively make up the capability. In the UK, these are referred to as the ‘defence lines of development’ (DLODs) and comprise: Training, People, Infrastructure, Doctrine, Information and Logistics – hence the ‘TEPIDOIL’ acronym for military capability. Each and every one of these elements is essential for the successful delivery of a complete capability solution.

The range of defense projects is vast. They comprise investments of several tens of millions (a very small project by defense standards) to several billions. Again, in the UK there are over 900 ‘project lines’ that make up the UK Ministry of Defence equipment plan. In the US, multiply that number by a factor of 5 or even 10 to appreciate the scale of the challenge.

The importance of project management knowledge, skills and experience has been recognised by both the US DOD and the UK MOD and now forms part of standard corporate competency frameworks. Progress in improving project performance has been made. But the story is more complicated than that.

Defense departments are very large and diverse organisations, and the maturity of their project management is variable from some very mature, to other less mature areas. The development of people across these organisations – including Front Line Commands that perform the ‘end user’ role – is essential. As a result, the management of projects as stand alone initiatives is rare. More likely is the need for

coordination and integration of projects across DLODs and in some cases, across capability areas.

This fact has led to an increasing emphasis on a ‘program’ approach to capability delivery. Successful project and program delivery requires a consistent internal way of working, and structures that enable people to work across organisational boundaries. That is not easily done when defense departments need to span both political and commercial landscapes.

In addition, there will always be more project and program opportunities to fill capability gaps than there are funds available to do them – especially in the age of increasing austerity. This brings into play the benefits that can be realised from a more structured approach to investment in change: portfolio management. Defense reform in the UK is now underpinned by a total P3M approach: project, program and portfolio management.

Key to success in applying these principles is the relationship with defense industry. At the end of the day, both the DoD and UK MOD are first and foremost customers – the so-called ‘Unified Customer’ construct. It goes without saying, but worth repeating, that defense capability – whether it’s new, updated or upgraded – does not happen without the contribution from industry as a supplier. Defense departments must therefore act as that ‘intelligent customer’ working with industry. This requires an effective customer – supplier relationship and an understanding of government role in dealing with industry. It also requires the right behaviours – on both sides of the house. Behaviours built on objectivity, honesty and transparency – not easy in any organisation, but increasingly recognised as essential if defense is to take on the challenges that inevitably lie ahead.

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