

The PRINCE and the Princess

Introduction

I recently authored a course aimed at the PRINCE2 Project Management Board (see my course listings at www.oaklodgeconsulting.co.uk). The general idea was that a lack of appreciation of the roles and responsibilities at this level accounts for many of the issues arising in PRINCE2 projects and my course puts all of this into context. It was whilst researching content for a good Case Study that I uncovered what I think should be a modification to the PRINCE2 rules for selecting the Executive.

The Case Study

A Case Study for the PM Board obviously needs to focus on project concerns at Board level. Not surprisingly there are not that many publicly recognised PM Board failures. Such issues, one way or another, tend to be deposited on the broad shoulders of the PM. Luckily in the week that I was doing the research a Commons Committee published its findings into the “Princess Diana Memorial Fountain” project. If you are not familiar with the project, it started out as a desire, driven by the public and the media, to have a memorial to Princess Diana. A committee was formed to oversee the project, consisting of members of the public, media, arts world and so on. The result of the (quite public) process was not quite what was expected. The fountain opened and quickly closed again due to accidents. It was closed for a long time whilst grooves were cut into the granite to help prevent people slipping. When it reopened, to popular acclaim, the granite had started to crack and the funding of the Royal Parks now has to take into account an extra maintenance cost of several hundreds of thousands of pounds.

For full details of this you either need to read the reports from the committees or (better) attend my course. The upshot of it all is that whilst the public apparently like the memorial, from a project point of view it is a disaster, with overspends and excessive maintenance costs hitting other important projects.

Lessons Learned

I should be very surprised if there is a formal Lessons Learned log from this project. The key lesson (selected from many others) for this short article concerns the selection and appointment of the Executive of the PM Board. Obviously such an individual clearly has the responsibility for the overall success of the project and must have the authority to get things done, all according to the usual PRINCE2 rule book. Gordon Brown, who was selected for this role, would appear to have all of the

qualifications to perform the role successfully. And yet it all failed, at least from conventional PM aspects.

Under detailed analysis there are many things wrong with the Project. Gordon Brown as the Executive would appear ideal, but the actual problem is that he is too senior to be held responsible for the project. The basic idea of accountability of the Executive (in PRINCE2 terminology) will fail if the level of the Executive pretty well makes it impossible to hold him/her to account. In this project we had a very bad combination of attributes: a public and popular project, attracting the great and the good, but who were not necessarily qualified; the project itself being of minor importance compared to the others currently being run by the Executive, leading to lack of commitment; a general lack of awareness at senior levels of how projects should run.

Unkind as it may seem, I think the PRINCE2 guidelines for selecting an Executive need to be modified to ensure that the hierarchy is such that the Executive can be pressured to achieve the results. If this does not happen then you are likely to see one of those political projects which is doomed to fail, as this was. I don't see Gordon sweating about the poor performance of the Fountain at G8 meetings!

The Visible Signs of Failure

Stop me if you have heard this, but I assume that you have noticed that when projects are going well all kinds of loosely involved individuals want to be associated with it. The converse is also true. As news gets worse, fewer and fewer staff appear to be involved - "Not me, Guv".

In the case of the Fountain, after it was opened (for the first time), the media was busy interviewing the members of the committee, the designer and so on. Even the gardeners had something to say about the Fountain.

On closure and re-opening, the committee were nowhere to be found. Unavailable, too busy, out of the country, etc., etc. Running the Economy was a unique and effective reason! The only person found available to comment was a Park Keeper, and that was only because he could not run away. His task was to stand by the pool with a "Keep Off" sign!

Sadly this behaviour is typical of failed projects, and something which sensible application of PRINCE2 will prevent happening, when it is given the chance. The enthusiastic amateur approach to running projects is no longer appropriate, in or out of the public eye.

About the Author

George Brooke is a Technical Trainer / Consultant as well as being a PRINCE2 Approved Trainer. As Head of Software Development at Siemens Nixdorf he managed solutions development for the Financial, Retail, Hotel and Energy markets for UK/European departments and customers worldwide, from concept through to delivery and roll-out. He runs a training and consultancy company based in Cambridge UK focusing on OO design with UML, programming and implementation techniques and IT project management . Contact him at [George Brooke](mailto:George.Brooke@oaklodgeconsulting.co.uk)