

# *The failure of the*

## Project failures and unclear goals

Delays and cost overruns seem to be something of a natural law in project management. Reports from all over the world unanimously create a very depressing picture. Regardless of industry, technical content, type, or national origin, projects are reported to suffer from significant delays and cost overruns with respect to set plans (Morris & Hough, 1987; Standish Group, 1999). However, in spite of these reports, project management and project organizing have become increasingly popular during recent decades, both in business and public administration. This is a paradox. In spite of its obvious failings, project-based management is believed to be an effective and dynamic alternative to traditional, and seemingly old-fashioned, bureaucratic structures. How come? A continuously failing management idea is expected to die, not become increasingly popular.

Analyses of project management failures usually deduce the cause as one of three main categories. First, projects seem to fail due to deficiencies in their management, i.e. insufficient planning, lack of coordination, improperly chosen technical solutions, etc. (Pinto & Kharbanda, 1995). Secondly, projects seem to fail because of environmental factors, i.e. being opposed by important stakeholders, other projects having a higher priority, or not obtaining sufficient resources, etc. (Cooper et al., 1999; Selin & Selin, 1992). Thirdly – and mainly – a large number of projects seem to fail because of their goals. Deficient contracts, vaguely defined assignments, unclear specifications, or goals that change signi-

ificantly during project execution are frequent complaints (Kharbanda & Stallworthy, 1992; Pinto & Prescott 1990). Similar criticism is also frequent in newspaper articles and in reviews of public projects (c.f. Von Porat, 1996). In other words, too many projects seem to be initiated without sufficient preparation, planning and feasibility studies. Too many decision-makers seem to initiate projects without having made clear what their intentions really are.

Criticism concerning imprecise project goals is nothing new. The problem has been a matter of discussion for more than 30 years (Art, 1972; Avots, 1969). Neither is there a lack of proposals for solutions. Almost every textbook or handbook in the field preaches the importance of clear and exact goals, how these goals should be formulated, how projects should be planned, scheduled, and budgeted, and how they should be assessed in terms of costs, benefits, and risks (Cleland & King, 1968; Goldratt, 1997; Maylor, 1996; Turner, 1999). The basic message is that a project should never be initiated without sufficient preparation. The same message is also taught during courses and training programs, in corporate directives and guidelines, and in the quality management systems companies use to control their projects (Mulder, 1997). So, why does the problem persist?

There are two possible answers to this question. Firstly, practice can (still) be dominated by dysfunctional behavior. This means that the actions of the practitioners have to be corrected so that they match the ideal. Secondly, it could be the normative theory that is unreasonable, i.e. the dominating role model might not correlate with the conditions that practical project managers have to adhere to. If so, it is the theoretical models – not the practical actions – that have to be revised.

This chapter departs from the latter interpretation. It argues that an unclear project goal is an intrinsic element of project management per se. Without denying the need for appropriate preparations, we have to accept that stipulated project goals can never be more than qualified guesses about the future. Firstly, stipulated project goals have to be understood as political products based on over-optimistic visions of future conditions. Their primary function is to create project beginnings, not to predict project ends. Secondly, the process of project execution is one of knowledge creation. While the stipulated goal defines the project's demarcations, its content has to be created through practical actions. Through the practical actions of project execution, expectations regarding future outcomes are transformed; firstly because exper-

iences are gained from actions performed, and secondly because time elapses and future outcomes gradually get closer. At project end, knowledge exists that was impossible to acquire at project initiation. At this point, the meaning of the project's goal is reinterpreted and the demarcation of the project scope is often revised. Ex post, we always know more than *ex ante*.

The rest of the chapter is structured in four sections. Firstly, the basic conceptual model of project management is outlined and the ideal of the project goal that constitutes and controls project execution is discussed. This is the model that will be critically examined in subsequent sections. In the second section, the political aspects of project selection and goal setting are discussed, with the claim that ambiguities and inconsistencies are natural components of most project assignments. The third section addresses the knowledge aspects of project execution, emphasizing how practical actions change the way the stipulated project goal was initially interpreted. In the final section, the chapter concludes with a discussion on how experiences from performed project actions influence expectations regarding project outcomes. The point is that evolutionary features of project goals are intrinsic elements of every project execution.

## The goal – the core of every project assignment

Projects are initiated in order to achieve something: to bring about a change, to construct a building, to develop a product, to implement a system, to execute a contract, or to search for new knowledge.<sup>1</sup> The basis for the decision to initiate a project is constituted by the expected results following project termination. Thus, the goal is the core element of every project's existence. The intentions behind the project legitimize the whole undertaking. In its purest form, all actions within a project are related to the project goal. If the goals change, the work of the project changes, and if the project becomes obsolete, it gets canceled.<sup>2</sup>

<sup>1</sup> The chapter primarily addresses projects which have a technical core, e.g. projects in product development or building construction. The discussion might be applicable to other types of projects as well, but that is beyond the scope of this chapter.

<sup>2</sup> In this way, Project Management is one of the ultimate and most explicit forms of "Management by Objectives".

### *The basic model of project management*

The basic conceptual model is simple: The project is an assignment with limited duration – a contract – given by one actor to another. The former actor is the client (other labels are *project sponsor* or *project owner*); the latter actor is the project manager. While the client orders and specifies what is to be accomplished at a certain point in the future; the project manager is in charge of the task's realization. Consequently, project management means coordinating all the necessary activities towards the project goal; predicting future, potential problems; choosing the appropriate technical solutions; and controlling that the project work is on track and within the given scope.

According to the model, the project constitutes the intermediate stage in a sequence of three stages:

- (1) *Project selection*, through which the client defines the project.
- (2) *Project execution*, through which the objectives of the assignment are realized.
- (3) *Project assessment*, where the final results are compared with the original goals and intentions.

Thus, the project assignment is initiated through a client decision whereby the goal is set and ended by a client decision when the final result is accepted. Between these decisions, the project is being executed (see Figure 14:1).

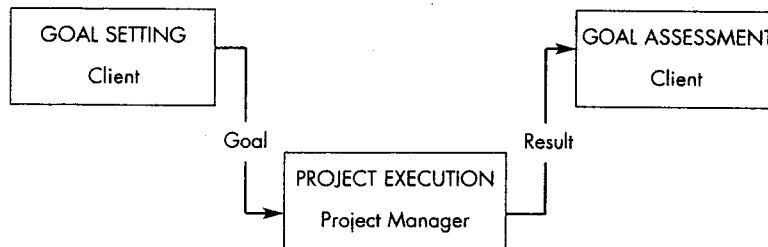


Figure 14:1 The basic conceptual model of project management.

### *The logics of project execution*

The process of project execution has some characteristic dynamics in relation to non-project operations (Archibald, 1976; Engwall, 1995; Selin, 1990). For example, the consumption of resources is typically unevenly distributed across the project's lifecycle. For most projects, a diagram of the cumulative expenditure of resources during their execution resembles an S-curve (see Figure 14:2). At the beginning of a project, few resources are consumed, few people are taken on and the basic planning does not require much expensive equipment or material. While the work is being carried out, more people are taken on, materials and equipment procured and consultants, suppliers, and contractors are contracted. Resource expenditure increases radically. After an intensive period, consumption typically decreases and, toward the end, there are only a few people left to close down the project, carrying out the necessary adjustment and reviews.

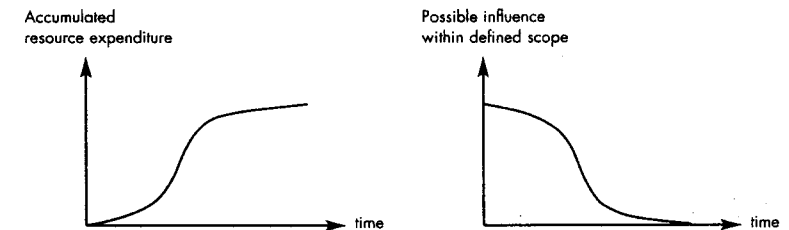


Figure 14:2 Accumulated resource expenditure and the possibility of influencing the end-result within the defined project scope.

However, the diagram outlining the possibility of influencing the end result is usually described using an inverted S-curve. During the early phases, when little work has been carried out, it is relatively easy to change direction and it is still possible to choose from different alternative actions. These possibilities disappear as decisions are made, as resources are consumed, and as calendar time elapses. At the end of the project, when knowledge of the end result is at its best, there are only limited possibilities of influencing the outcomes, within the specified scope. During this phase, it is often very tempting to propose improve-

ments and changes. However, since these often mean changing a long series of activities that have in turn been building on each other since project initiation, late revisions are usually both complicated and costly to implement.

### *Goals demarcating the execution process*

In order to gain control of this process, the strategy taught in most project management literature is to reduce uncertainty as much, and as early on, as possible during the process (PMI, 1996). Ideally, the project should be so thoroughly planned that the objectives are stipulated in detail and frozen, before any practical action is undertaken (for an alternative view, cf. Eisenhardt & Tabrizi, 1995; Iansiti & MacCormack, 1997). The stipulated project goal should be explicit, specified in detail, internally consistent, and stable over time. Furthermore, the goal should be specified in three dimensions (PMI, 1996):

- 1) *Performance*, what is to be done during the project (some authors use the labels functionality or quality) – typically defined in a *technical specification*.
- 2) *Time*, when the work is to be finished – typically defined in a *time schedule*, and
- 3) *Costs*, what amount and which type of resources are allowed to be spent – typically defined in a *project budget*.

These goals should then be broken down systematically into clear and consistent objectives, sub-objectives and milestones, which should subsequently be translated into project activities and work-packages. Since these work-packages are the basic input of project planning and scheduling, this kind of breakdown analysis is taught as the cornerstone for all project planning and scheduling.

For practical project managers, this approach usually makes sense: in practice, too many projects seem to be initiated without thorough and well-prepared goals. Furthermore, the practical process of breaking down goals into objectives, sub-objectives, and work-packages is a good collective exercise for the project team. By discussing the project objectives in depth with each other, a conceptual structure of the project assignment at hand is constructed. Problematic ambiguities in the goal, differences in the interests of the stakeholders, and any misun-

derstandings can be identified and sorted out. Since a thorough analysis forces the team members to declare their values and interests, it is also a good team-building experience.

The belief that it is possible to define and freeze the project objectives once and for all at the beginning of a project is problematic. However, since the pre-project goal setting process has a significant impact on project execution, this issue will be addressed in the next section

### *The necessity of goal ambiguity*

The primary function of a stipulated project goal is to create a start, not to predict final outcomes. At project initiation, it is necessary to have ambiguous goals that can unite stakeholders with different interests in supporting one and the same undertaking. The ambiguity makes it possible for different intentions and interests to co-exist during project initiation. Consequently, an ambiguous project proposal can be instrumental in order to pass through the project selection process. However, ambiguous goals outline visionary directions for the future, but they provide few details about actions that are necessary at present. Managing the path from goal ambiguity to goal formation is thus a core competency of practical project management.

### *Project initiation and rational decision-making*

How goals are formed and decided upon is little discussed in the project management literature. Instead, the project goal is treated as an already-defined and established objective fact. In principle, all actors are expected to be completely honest and to subordinate all their personal interests to the overall project mission. A project under execution is usually assumed to have been selected and initiated through a *rational decision-making process*, wherein different alternative projects have been assessed on the basis of realistically established plans and calculations (Simon, 1957). The project is assumed to be the logical effect of the way in which the decision-makers have assessed the consequences of each alternative. Thus, the chosen project is seen as the best possible alternative for the situation in question.

In many normative theories (e.g. project management theory), the

model of rational decision-making has the status of a highly desirable ideal for practice. The rationalistic ideal also impregnates the language of modern business, politics, and public administration. However, during recent decades, a large number of empirical research studies have shown that the model is a very poor depiction of how decisions are made in practice. This criticism has addressed all aspects of the decision-making process: the formulation of the original problem, the identification of the possible alternative courses of action, the description of the consequences of each alternative, the evaluation of the consequences, the elimination of some alternatives, and final selection from the remaining options (Brunsson, 1989; Cohen et al., 1972; Danielsson & Malmberg, 1979; Jacobsson, 1987; Lindblom, 1959; March, 1988; Sahlin-Anderson, 1986).

In spite of the rhetoric, there are probably few projects in practice that are the result of a rational decision-making process. Project proposals are often controversial since projects are often visible, involve changes for certain interest groups, and exploit resources that could have been used in alternative ways. There is often a high degree of uncertainty concerning both the consequences that the project initiative will have on the future and the way in which the project work should best be managed. Consequently, gaining the necessary support for a project proposal at the selection stage usually requires some form of coalition of decision-makers representing different interests (Baier et al., 1986). Coalition building usually means negotiations. Negotiations normally mean compromises and compromises usually mean reformulations, supplements and changes to the original proposal (Bauer, 1968). In other words, the methods of gaining support for a project proposal are such that they in many ways contradict an efficient implementation process. Instead of precision and consistency, the logic of the decision-making process seems to produce exactly the opposite.

### *The importance of imprecision*

In decision-making processes, a *proposal seldom gains support by being precisely and clearly formulated*, with all the possible consequences formulated in every little detail (Sahlin-Andersson, 1989). This is especially true for projects, where the positive and negative consequences are usually unevenly distributed over time. The negative con-

sequences of project execution (costs, disruptions, and efforts on a relatively short-term basis) are usually close together in time since they are a necessity for creating the intended positive long-term effects of the project. Consequently, the positive effects are often bound to be visionary rather than concrete. They can seldom be evaluated with the same degree of certainty as the negative consequences.

Actually, the very presence of ambiguities can enable different stakeholders to support a project for different reasons and with different expectations regarding the result. An ambiguous goal can be a means of gaining support by allowing one and the same project to be seen in different contexts and to be given different meanings. All differences in interests, expectations, and preferences have to be suppressed during the coalition building, particularly if the proposal risks being called into question (Jacobsson, 1987). Thus, one instrumental strategy for gaining support for a project proposal is formulating the proposal on a principle, visionary, and non-detailed level which allows some ambiguity and inconsistency in the project's content (Sahlin, 1996). Consequently, future sources of conflict are common outputs from project selection processes.

### *The function of over-optimism*

There is a considerable risk that a project proposal that has successfully passed through the selection process is *over-optimistic* (March & Olsen, 1976). This could be a deliberate, conspiratorial strategy by the project's proponents in order to get the proposal through the decision-making process. As a professor of civil engineering is said to have taught his students at the Royal Institute of Technology in Sweden during the late 1950's:

"Boys, you have to remember [...] that if you are going to calculate the cost of building a power plant, underestimate your calculations so that construction work can start. There are no power plants that are only half-completed." (Grennberg, 1998: 6)

Even though this comment concerned construction work, the principal message is still valid for most projects. However, over-optimism in project goals might not be deliberate. Since there is competition between

different alternative proposals at the selection stage, it is unlikely that a proposal that is presented cautiously, with detailed, pessimistic calculations and suppressed positive expectations, would gain sufficient political support to be selected. Consequently, there is a much higher level of probability that proposals which actually pass the approval process are based on over-optimistic, rather than under-optimistic, expectations and plans (Baier et al., 1986).

However, the observation that the decision-makers deviate, in practice, from the rational model does not imply that they are stupid, untalented, or irrational – only that their behavior does not fit the theoretical model. An alternative view is that decision-making should, in practice, be understood as a means of initiating and achieving collective action, rather than a choice between different alternatives (Brunsson, 1985).

Following this view, effective action requires actors who are committed, well motivated and confident in order that they will be able to manage the task. Furthermore, the action has to be seen to be “right” and the actors should have high expectations regarding the outcomes of their efforts. The decision manifests the expectations and motivation. Through the decision, the decision-makers have explicitly committed themselves to a particular option (for example a project). Consequently, an effective decision-making process entails that only a few project proposals are analysed, that only the positive consequences of the selected project are considered, and that the competing alternatives are presented so negatively that they are considered to be unreasonable. Often, an initial over-confidence seems to be necessary if a project is to get under way at all. To maintain their level of enthusiasm, practical decision-makers have no objection to being kept a little in the dark (Andersson, 1981). Or, in the words of a senior consultant at a Swedish engineering firm:

“My experience is that if we specify in detail, at project initiation, what we are going to do, the client usually becomes negative. It is better to be imprecise at the beginning and discuss the necessary actions with the client during project execution”.

## The irrelevance of goals to project execution

The political negotiations do not end at project initiation – they only move into another phase. Project initiation often means concrete action. At project initiation, commitments are made, contracts are signed, resources are allocated, equipment is purchased, project teams are formed, plans are drawn up, and the actors involved start to coordinate their future activities in relation to each other. During project execution, decisions and actions build upon each other in such a way that the activities of the early phases constitute and create the prerequisites for actions during subsequent phases. All actions within the project are related to previous actions, and previous actions cannot be undone afterwards. Thus, a project that has passed the point of initiation is usually very difficult to stop (Sahlin-Anderson, 1986). Instead, it has to be changed or adjusted.

For instance, project execution usually entails a monopolistic relationship between a client and a contractor (Engwall, 1990; Stinchcombe, 1985). So when the client tries to raise the technical ambitions for the outcome (within stipulated budget and time-limits), the contractor usually tries to get more money (for a technically less ambitious product). Consequently, the execution phase constitutes new rules for negotiations. Facing the risk of a half-completed project, it is often easier to acquire more time and resources for an ongoing project during execution than for a project proposal during the selection phase. In a similar way, there is usually a tendency among other stakeholders to try to maneuver an ongoing project into line with their own opportunistic interests. During project execution, there are often attempts by different stakeholders to attach problems and solutions that happen to be in the environment at the same time as the project (Sahlin-Anderson, 1986).

These political processes primarily concern the demarcation lines between the project and its environment. These processes are important since they gradually define the exact extension of the project scope. However, well-defined exterior demarcations are not enough. In order to create an end-result, the project content has to acquire a meaning. The originally abstract project goals have to be transformed into concrete manifestations. Project execution is thus an evolutionary process wherein expectations regarding the outcomes interact with experiences gained from the performed actions. Gradually during the course

of project execution, expectations and experiences become coherent and, in the end, the goal becomes definite. Goal formation is thus a core element of project execution.

### *The idea of an exogenous goal*

In project management theory, the project goal (as well as its meaning) is created outside the process of realizing it. As an initial input, the project goal is assumed to be an independent variable of the execution process: it influences the process, but is not influenced by it. Thus, the practical actions of the execution process have no influence on the meaning of the stipulated goals. Ideally, all the necessary knowledge should be available during project selection and there should be no unplanned learning during project execution. Consequently, we are supposed to know exactly what we want to achieve and how to accomplish it, right from the beginning.

This ideal of an exogenous goal is based on the idea that it is possible to fully specify the content of a project before it is executed in practice. This is a basic assumption about the nature of project management, which adheres to an old tradition in Western philosophy constituted by the belief that true knowledge is the same as theoretical knowledge (Molander, 1997) and that all this knowledge is possible to articulate using exact and unambiguous language (Frängsmyr, 1974; Göranson, 1986; Toulmin, 1991). Adhering to this tradition, mathematical knowledge – with its exact definitions, propositions, and logical deductions – is the ideal. The application of knowledge is also seen as a separate (and subordinated) activity to the knowledge itself. In other words: it is possible to possess knowledge, without necessarily being able to apply it (Molander, 1996).

### *The learning component in goal realization*

This separation of goal-formation from goal-realization might be a good description for repetitive undertakings whose execution exploits already existing and standardized knowledge. However, when applied to undertakings comprising any kind of element new to the actors involved, it becomes problematic (Schön, 1983). For such undertakings,

it is not possible to acquire important knowledge elements by planning beforehand. Instead, they have to be acquired by means of practical actions. In relation to planning and goal-setting activities, which only consist of abstract thinking, project execution means a gradual interaction between theoretical and practical knowledge (Engwall, 2002). During project execution, learning occurs in the tension between the abstractions (theories, goals, plans, etc.) and the experiences gained from the performed concrete actions (experiments, tests, prototypes, manufacturing, construction, etc.). Through improved planning prior to project execution, it is possible to create good knowledge of what *ought to be possible* to accomplish within the project, which measures *ought to be possible* to execute, which results *ought to be possible* to produce, and what consequences *ought to be* the effects of performed outcomes. However, it is not until during practical execution that it is actually assessed (with any certainty) whether the planned actions were possible to implement in practice and, if this is the case, whether they had the intended effects or not.

Hence, during project execution, knowledge is developed with regard to what the project “actually” means. The project goal acquires a concrete (often even physical) *gestalt*. The participating actors acquire hands-on experience of the project content. In this way, the project execution process becomes a mutual experience. It becomes a *shared example* (Kuhn, 1962) for the participators.

### *Practical actions and ex post discoveries of alternatives*

In addition, the performed actions introduce inertia into the process. Thus, since actions in turn build upon previous actions, it becomes more and more difficult to change direction. Metaphorically, it is like a carpenter sculpting a piece of wood; once the first cut has been made, the process is irrevocable. Each new cut has to be planned and made with respect to the outcome of the previous cuts. As Molander (1996, p. 17) describes it:

“The doing is *one*, irrevocable, definitive. [In advance,] you can speculate about different possibilities and interpretations. Anyhow, the action is the point when we leave the level of pure possibilities and act in *one* way – the world changes, there is no way back.”

Consequently, the closer the carpenter comes to the finished product –

the narrower the range of potential alternative cuts. However, project work has an additional element. Since there is a specified deadline for completion, calendar time is continuously elapsing. Thus, the range of potential actions – within the stipulated project scope – is gradually narrowing, even if no action is taken. For instance, an old rule of thumb states that during the late project phases, when knowledge of the end result is at most its sophisticated, costs can only increase; never decrease (Selin, 1990). However, knowledge that was impossible to acquire earlier might still emerge during the very late phases of a project (Kreiner, 1995). In product development, for example it is not until the first real sample of the new product has been launched onto the market that it becomes possible to obtain an actual test of how the product is being received (independently of how many market surveys have previously been conducted). Dependent on market responses to these first samples, it might be necessary to adjust the project goals; otherwise the project would not have been of any use at all. Furthermore, at that point, it is always easy to tell what one ought to have known about beforehand (Engwall, 2002).

Finally, the preferences of the actors involved tend to evolve over time due to the learning process of project execution. While the project is being executed, the actors gradually get a better understanding of the practical consequences of the actions being performed (March, 1971). While learning what the project goal means in concrete terms, they also learn what the project does not mean. However, they also learn what the project could have meant with a different history.

During the execution process, the participants gradually acquire insights into what would have been possible to accomplish under different conditions, e.g. if they had acted a little bit differently in the beginning, if they had been assigned slightly more resources, but – above all – if their knowledge had been a little bit different or a little bit deeper right from the beginning. Thus, even if the wording of the stipulated goal is exactly the same in the end as its initial articulation, its wording will have another meaning in the end. At the end, the goal is not just an abstract text anymore, instead referring to practical experiences gained from actions, outcomes, mistakes, and successes achieved during execution. It is not until the consequences of decisions are realized that it will be possible to understand, with any certainty, which decision one should actually have taken (given that we have had the knowledge beforehand). *Ex post* we always know more than *ex ante*.

## Project execution – a process of goal formation

The discussion so far can be summarized in two paragraphs. First, project goals are political products. As input into the project process, it is natural that they comprehend ambiguities and inconsistencies, paving the way for politics, negotiations, and interpretation. Second, the meaning of the project goal evolves during the execution process. It is impossible to know everything beforehand. Some insights are dependent on practical experiences gained from execution. Consequently, it is natural that previous ideas and actions are reinterpreted when they are implemented. A stipulated project goal can never be anything more than a hypothesis. In the best case, a goal is a qualified judgement about future conditions and preferences. In the worst case, it is only a guess.

The language of project management conjures up a picture of clear, consistent, and stable goals waiting to be transformed into end-results via a linear process implementation. It is the language of a partially frozen world, where there is no environmental evolution during the project's lifecycle and where there is complete and perfect knowledge prior to project initiation. In practice, however, there are probably few project managers who would recognize themselves in such a description. In practice, the conditions of project management are much more chaotic, with goals that are continuously changing and where goal ambiguities and a lack of precision are the means of dealing with conflicts, visionary thinking, but also concrete experience. Since projects have time extensions, there is always a risk that the project environment will evolve in another direction than the one expected, entailing that the project will in the end be evaluated on the basis of premises and experiences which differ from those in force at the time of project initiation.

One possible conclusion might be that stipulated goals are only empty phrases and that goal setting is only a ceremonial charade in order to protect the project from opponents in its environment. If so, project goals are unnecessary, except for political reasons. However, this would be neglecting the significance of goals for constituting project dynamics. Goals can be, to varying degrees, open ended, but for most projects, the stipulated goal is more than just an empty symbol. The project goal provides direction. It focuses on a preferred state in the future. It redirects attention from other issues to problems and solutions related to the project. Furthermore, the goal constructs trajectory



ries over time: it relates future outcomes to actions and activities carried out today. Through the goal, the actors involved can create a common future. It becomes possible to coordinate the actions of today with expected outcomes in the future. However, in relation to other kinds of goals, the time specificity of project goals makes them distinct.

Project goals have traditionally been discussed as *a basis for defining the demarcation line* between the tasks that do belong to (or ought to belong to) the project and those that do not. This is the function emphasized in most project management literature. Clear, consistent, and realistic objectives are claimed to enable the project manager to gain control over the project execution process. Simultaneously, they are claimed to protect her from being blamed for failures and problems outside the project work.

However, the project goal also *creates expectations*. At project initiation, there is a stipulated, abstract project goal; there are resources allocated to the project; and there are expectations regarding future outcomes, but also regarding the process of creating the outcomes. Through the execution process, the goals evolve from abstract visions into *concrete experiences*: words are interpreted, actions are performed, and the world changes. During the course of the process, expectations regarding the project are transformed, due to experiences gained from performing actions in combination with the fact that (calendar) time is elapsing and the predicted future is approaching.

Usually, the transformation of expectations has two effects on project execution: (1) the project goal is reinterpreted and redefined, and (2) the project demarcations are renegotiated with the environment. Thus, the distance decreases between experiences gained from actions performed within the project and expectations regarding future actions in the project. At the end of the project, experiences and expectations are coherent. However, at this point, the expectations have a different meaning to what they did at project initiation.

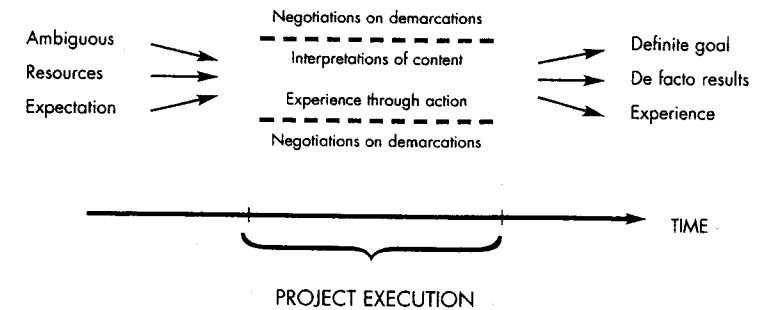


Figure 14:3 Project execution – a process of goal formation.

Consequently, instead of the image of a linear process whereby the initially stipulated goal is directly translated into a final result, project execution is better understood as a non-linear process of goal formation, revolving around stipulated goals, evolving expectations, negotiated demarcations and gradually gained experiences (see Figure 14:3). The point is that the definitive goal of the end of the project is related to the experiences of execution and that these experiences are usually not available at project initiation.

To conclude; the quest for the perfectly-stipulated project goal is futile. Projects will always be initiated on the basis of vague and limited knowledge of the future and what is politically possible at the time. Projects will continue to be delayed, they will overspend, and they will change in relation to their original intentions. Consequently, there will also be cries for better goals and more detailed specifications in the future, too. However, an understanding that the process of goal formation continues throughout the entire project lifecycle will bring the true nature of project management to the forefront. Project management is not – as it is sometimes depicted in textbooks – the passive process of implementing already-defined objectives. On the contrary, it is the active art of creating conditions, meaning, and expectations for the future. Taking this into consideration, project execution is seldom a process of implementation; rather it is a journey of knowledge creation.