



Rigour versus Tempo: Project discipline in a dynamic world

August 2021

Written by:

Andrew Gray – Senior Principal Consultant

Leigh Storer – Consultant

Part of a series of papers exploring different
programme and project tensions.



Contents

Introduction	3
Project and Programme Tensions	4
Recognising the need for rigour	5
When a high tempo is needed	6
How to balance rigour and tempo	7
Planning delivery	8
Devolved responsibility	9
Flexible controls	10
Conclusions	12

Introduction

Rigour in Programmes, Projects and Portfolios is about discipline and adherence to processes, rules and structure.

Discipline can be found in many forms in people, from individuals (self), through teams, and up to whole organisations. It depends on culture and often driven by external political, legal or societal norms

However, this is often seen as, and can be, the antithesis to flexibility, agility and the ability react to dynamic forces, even though an agile development environment imposes its own disciplines.

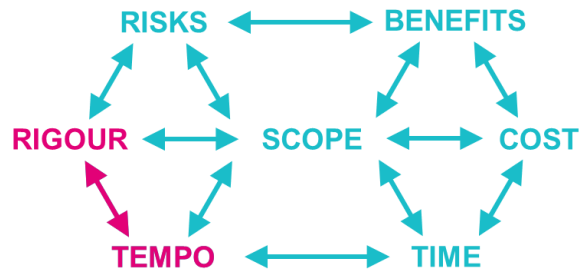
This raises key questions - what disciplines and rigour are needed for dynamic environments, and given that projects depend on people to work, how can we address the individual and collective tensions that arise?

This paper reviews the underlying issues and briefly explores a few examples of approaches that can be used to address the challenges. It is part of a developing series that explores different programme tensions.



Project and programme tensions

Many different tensions exist in a project or programme, all of which affect quality of deliverables. Frameworks and techniques exist to help address the tensions, but can also exacerbate them.



Programme Tensions, image reproduced from APM Introduction to Programme Management (2016)

One tension arises from the need for **rigour** or discipline in projects using these frameworks. This can be perceived as the antithesis of a need for flexibility and agility within a high **tempo** environment. Discipline, in the form of rules, can be seen as a straitjacket, making it difficult to 'move'. So what is meant by rigour and tempo?

Rigour *noun*

1. The full or extreme severity of laws, rules etc
2. Scrupulous or inflexible accuracy of adherence

This is quite a negative definition when compared to that of **rule**:

Rule *noun*

1. A principle governing conduct, action etc
2. Customary or normal manner, practice

We will use rigour in the context of this paper as equivalent to **discipline**: adhering to the underlying principles that need to be followed. However the definition above does emphasise the danger in the inflexible application of rules and taking them to excess.

Tempo *noun*

1. Characteristic rate, rhythm or pattern of work or activity

Tempo is about the rhythm and heartbeat of a project or development environment (equivalent to 'cadence').

A high tempo can be effective in addressing dynamic project environments – it is the rate that changes can be made within a project, or the frequency that the project reflects, plans and adjusts according to the results of the preceding interval. It is not the same as **time**, which is the period in which the project events occur.

Recognising the need for rigour

Without a framework to set a course, and discipline to follow that course, a project team is like a rudderless ship: moving without any control or reason, at the whim of every change in wind or current, and destined for an inglorious end. Rigour allows for control of a project to avoid this and outlines how change can be executed in a safe manner.

There is a wide – and competitive – choice of frameworks to use in the Project, Programme and Portfolio environment.

Whilst they may have different perspectives or origins, they typically reduce to similar principles.

But as with many things, even the ‘best’ frameworks can be incorrectly chosen, poorly understood, badly applied or even deliberately

undermined by those involved.

One framework is not necessarily ‘better’ than another just because of the volume of its adherents. For example, ‘ten characteristics of a good agile project manager’ are typically also the characteristics of a good project manager **in general**, regardless of framework.

Many discuss Agile versus Sequential (Waterfall) as if

it is a singular indisputable choice. There is a need to understand each framework in depth and their behaviours, drivers, characteristics and cultures that the frameworks try to engender or build upon.

 AgilePM

 **apm**
ASSOCIATION FOR
PROJECT MANAGEMENT
CHARTERED BODY
PROJECT PROFESSION



 Praxis™

 **AXELOS**
GLOBAL BEST PRACTICE

 **PMI**
Project Management Institute

 **ISO**
ISO 21500:2012
Guidance on Project Management

Without rigour, a project team is like a rudderless ship...



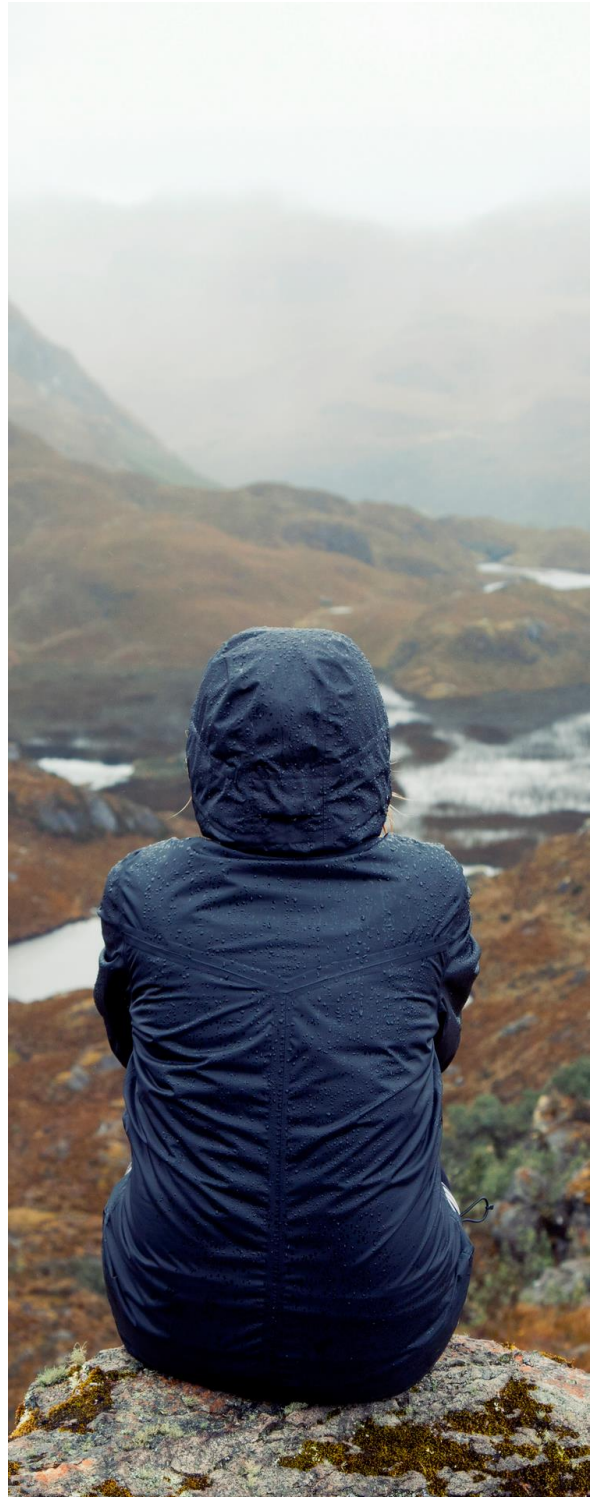
When a high tempo is needed

Tempo is essentially the project heartbeat. It needs to reflect the environment – such as taking frequent adjustments in a changing landscape.

If the environment is changing and the goal is not fully in sight, do not expect to follow a straight line for a long distance. There is a need to set a course to the next visible waypoint, and then re-assess. Flexibility in approach is necessary, which in turn allows for reaction and adjustments as they are experienced and learnt.

When the tempo goes off-beat

If a project tempo is set that is at odds with the environment it is in, risk of potential issues increases. A high tempo means when small things go wrong, they can become big problems very quickly. Provided there is enough risk contingency to deal with unplanned events, then issues can be dealt with before they impact on the project. It is advised that teams are given time and space to pause, breathe and reflect on what has been done before moving onto the next cycle. Stakeholders will want to see progress, but poor quality deliveries will be worse than interim deliveries with further capabilities to follow.



Tempo is needed to make steps and adjust in a changing environment

How to balance rigour and tempo

How can Project Management disciplines avoid structural inertia and work at a high tempo?

The following examples are areas to focus on - in order to address the tensions:



Planning delivery

How to structure project life cycle phases around high tempo delivery



Devolved responsibility

How to make project structures more effective and representative



Flexible controls

How to achieve project controls that balance governance with flexibility

“ Programmes must be underpinned by a controlled project environment of effective direction, management, delivery and reporting disciplines. ”

Managing Successful Programmes®
(Axelos, 2011)

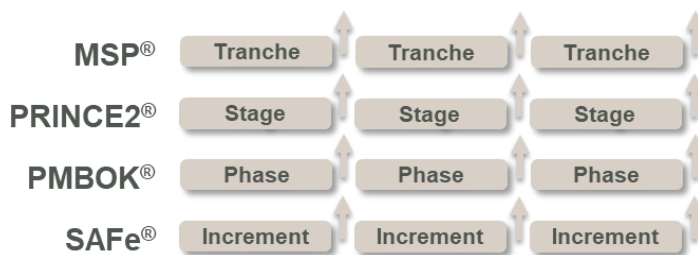
Planning delivery

How do we structure Projects around high tempo delivery?

Project Management frameworks are typically consistent in advocating appropriately sized delivery phases.

Looking at four examples below, each framework has different titles for intervals in projects, but the overall structure is similar. Depending on the methodology they could be fixed in scope and adjust the time to suit, or they could be fixed in time and adjust the scope to suit. They can also overlap successfully if considered carefully.

Selecting the right project strategy is critical – but it doesn't have to be mutually exclusive, especially in a Programme environment.

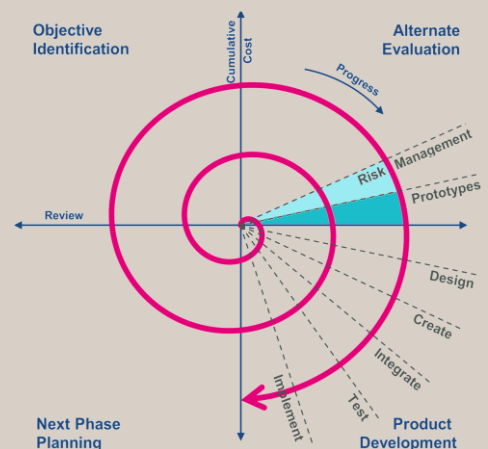


Many frameworks show linear blocks when representing intervals. However it is more beneficial to think of these as continuously improving or developing learning cycles that take steps into the unknown – and therefore a focus on risk is critical.

A focus on risk

Consider the balance between iterations, risks, customer interactions and the unknown.

Boehm's Spiral Model (Boehm, 1988) can be mentally 'unfurled' into Linear or 'tightened' into Agile representations. It is adaptable for long period hardware developments or short period software capability iterations. There is a large focus on understanding and managing risk. The spiral model considers how risk will be identified, how it will be managed through the cycle. It places risk front and foremost before other project principles, whereas other frameworks tend to consider risk after the project has been planned. This model is particularly useful when users are unsure of what they require.



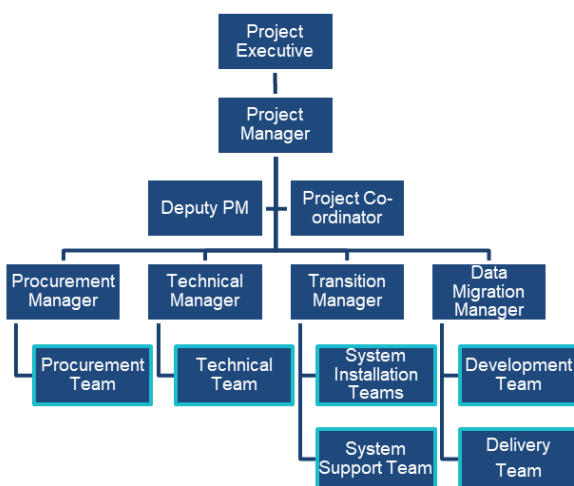
Boehm's Spiral Model (1988) (modified)

Devolved responsibility

How can we make our project organisation more effective in a high tempo environment?

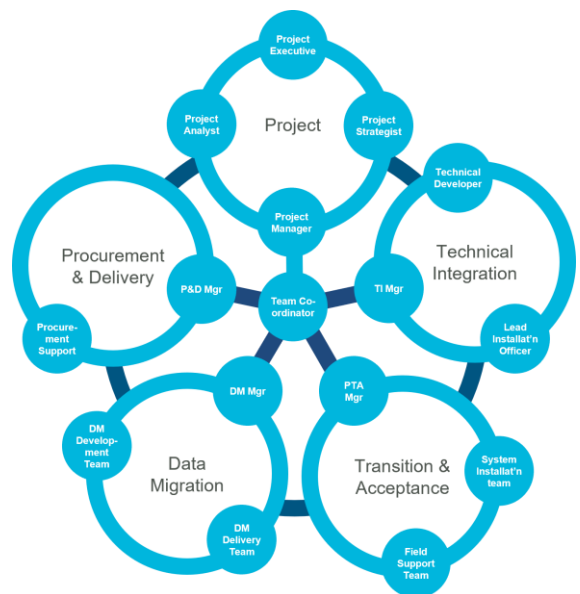
The challenge of hierarchy and rank

Below is an example of a classic hierarchical project team, especially within organisations which have strong rank or layered environment. In this case the power distance is such that decisions are typically pushed upwards. However, we need devolved responsibility to enable decisions to be made swiftly and at the point of criticality. This also means improved awareness throughout the team so that decisions are robust and aware of the strategic or project context. Traditional hierarchical structures are also not always representative of how a project team might work in practice on a daily basis.



A team of teams

This figure shows the same team in a revised structure and with roles adapted from the AgilePM® framework. There is not a large change in relationships, but a significant change in how the team perceives itself.



The Project Manager and Team Co-Ordinator (as it is called here) is a critical relationship at the heart of the delivery team. The Project Strategist looks over the next planning horizon, and the Project Analyst 'joins up' the operational business environment and project technical elements. This also represents a more accurate view of how the team sees themselves and the shared responsibilities they carry.

The structure respects the wider programme environment in which it sits, but is less influenced by the grades of the people that undertake the roles.

Flexible Controls

How can we have project controls that balance governance and flexibility?

Excessive controls may only give an illusion of good governance, and stifle the ability to move and iterate quickly.

Modern-day aircraft flight decks now present critical information on multi-use control screens to pilots, and if required they can delve deeper for more detailed information. This is a contrast to older generation flight decks where there was significant information presented with a plethora of controls that a pilot might not necessarily need all the time. Over time, flight deck ergonomics and crew behaviour has been carefully considered to ensure an optimum level of trusted information is now gathered, managed and presented to assist decision making at a much faster pace. The same idea applies to Project Controls.



Utilising Lean controls and techniques

- Kanban is a technique that visualises and manages the workflow.
- The team identifies and sizes tasks against their resources for each iteration.
- Allows the team to be loaded effectively so that contingency is in place to reduce the risk of the tempo becoming 'off beat'.
- Determine dependencies and risks associated with each individual task.
- Use burn up charts to monitor not only progress but the changing environment (unplanned injected tasks during the cycle).
- The tasks on the board underpin the overarching schedule (deliberately kept simple) that dovetails with the programme master schedule.

“

I do believe that a methodology has as many dangers as benefits. The benefits are that a set of guidelines are established that are aimed to bring some order to the project life cycle. Everyone understands what stage the projects are at, what information is needed to start a phase and what deliverables are expected at the end of a phase.

One danger is that the methodology is inappropriate. It is not uncommon for a team of enthusiastic but green graduates or a team of near-retirement project people to be given the task of designing the project life cycle. The methodology is then rigidly followed by the project teams because it is the approved way of doing things. Another danger is that the method becomes inappropriate as time passes, new techniques are developed and the company structure changes.

Methodologies need to be followed but they need to be reviewed from time to time.

Geoff Reiss, “Programme Management Demystified” (1996)

Conclusions

Projects need discipline and rigour to execute the right activities at the right time in the right way. Otherwise, chaos prevails.

Dynamic environments need flexibility & reactivity in the projects. This can be achieved through frequent iterations of solutions and re-appraisals, in essence, a high project tempo.

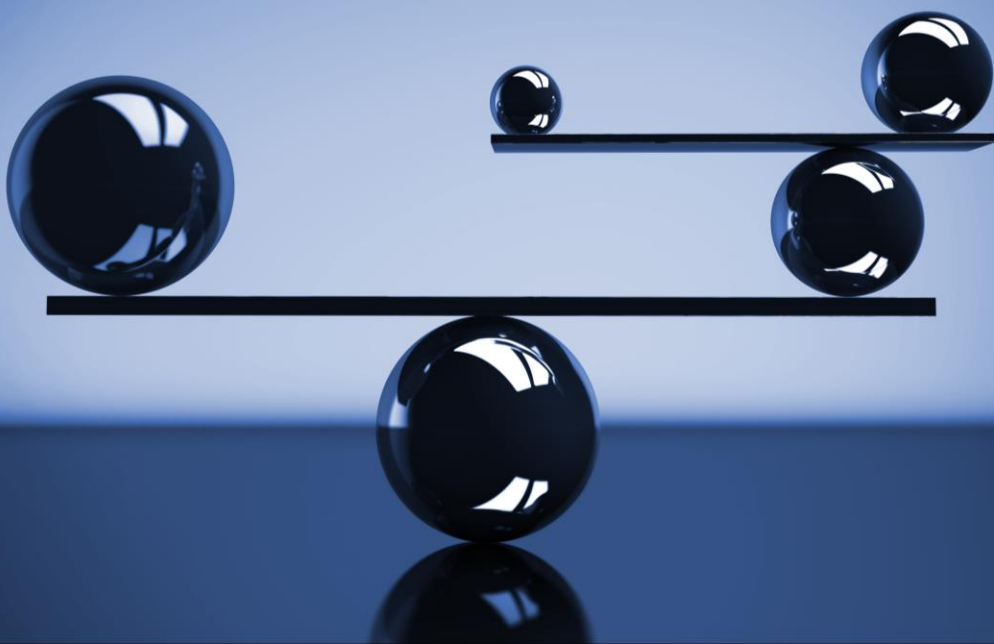
There is, therefore, a potential tension between rigour and tempo. This can be either perceived or actual structural inertia generating constraints on 'freedom of movement'.

But having project management disciplines does not mean constricting flexibility. First put the effort into understanding why a PM framework advocates what it does.

It is possible to adapt and tailor the frameworks – when you have good reason. Consider and challenge the frameworks, but don't forget the underlying principles. Make them work for you.

Work as a team to find the (potentially hidden) benefits. It will take effort to convince people to adapt approaches if they are only used to one method.

Project teams need to find the right balance between rigour and tempo



Bibliography

References:

- AgilePM (2014). *AgilePM Handbook v2*. Agile Business Consortium
- Axelos (2011). *Managing Successful Programmes 2011 Edition*.
- Axelos (2017). *Managing Successful Projects with PRINCE2*.
- Boehm, B. (1988). *A Spiral Model of Software Development and Enhancement*.
- Dictionary.com (2021). *Definition of Rigour, Rules & Tempo*. Retrieved from <https://www.dictionary.com/>
- Gray, A; Kelleher, A; Macklin, A; Wallington, E. (2016). *APM Introduction to Programme Management*. 2nd Edition APM, Princes Risborough
- Project Management Institute. (2017). *The Project Management Book of Knowledge*.
- Reiss, G. (1996). *Programme Management Demystified*. Spon Press, London
- Scaled Agile Framework. (2021). *Scaled Agile Framework*. Retrieved from <https://www.scaledagileframework.com/build-incrementally-with-fast-integrated-learning-cycles/>

Further Reading:

- Association for Project Management. (2017). *Guide to Life Cycles and Life Cycle Models*. Retrieved from APM Systems Thinking Specific Interest Group: <https://www.apm.org.uk/media/13835/guide-to-lifecycle-models.pdf>
- Remington, K; Pollack, J. 2007, *Tools for Complex Projects*, Gower: Farnham

Acknowledgements

- P3 Stopwatch by Tsvetoslav Hristov on Unsplash (unsplash.com/photos/QW-f6s9nFIs)
- P5 Shipwreck of MV Alta by Colm Ryan, available under the Creative Commons Attribution-ShareAlike 4.0 Licence, https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/File:MV_Alta,_shipwrecked_off_the_Ballycotton_coast_color.jpg
- P10 A350 Flight Deck © Airbus SAS: <https://www.airbus.com/virtual.html?uuid=e19e24a9-fb3d-47d7-9b4b-6894f0a5c72f&title=Airbus-A350-1000-demo-tour-7>
- P6, P7 & P12 Images used under licence to BMT Group

All other diagrams and images © BMT Group, unless specifically referenced otherwise.



Thank you

Copyright© by BMT

All rights reserved. No part of this publication may be reproduced, distributed, or transmitted in any form or by any means, including photocopying, recording, or other electronic or mechanical methods, without the prior written permission of BMT. Where content has not been produced by BMT, we have sought the appropriate authorisation for its use and does not constitute an infringement of copyright.