

The fine line between success and failure

“So, we’re measuring project success as successfully defining how success is measured...”

“Brilliant! It can’t fail...”



The Olympic Games has finished and Great Britain has achieved its highest medal haul in modern times. That is since the London Olympics in 1908 where Great Britain won a staggering 107 medals, including 56 gold, and topped the table by a long way; allegedly in those days they almost gave away medals for just turning up!

In Beijing 2008 Team GB won a total of 47 medals (19 of which were gold), which were six more than the UK Government’s target and 12 more than the target set by UK Sport. Team GB finished fourth in the medal table. As a result most people perceive Team GB’s efforts as a resounding success. But it appears not to have been a success for everyone. The Performance Director of UK Athletics, Dave Collins, was sacked for ‘under achievement’ because the athletics team only won four medals against a target of five and therefore the ‘perception’ is that he has failed to deliver.

We have been reflecting on these two perceptions, and drawing parallels to the world of project and programme management and how fine the line is between success and failure.

It would appear that as a programme the work undertaken to

prepare for Beijing 2008 delivered the benefits it set out to, as measured by the number of medals won versus the targets set. However this holistic view does not take into account the performance of individual projects that made up the programme some of which were, as in the case of the athletics team, less successful than others. One of the questions this begs is “should success be measured at project or programme level, assuming the project is part of a programme?” Or perhaps more to the point “should success be measured now or is success for some elements of the UK Olympic programme still to be achieved as part of London 2012 and beyond?” Maybe cycling, rowing, sailing and to some extent swimming have delivered some quick wins whereas other sports such as athletics are part of a longer term strategy and cannot be expected to deliver just yet? It would be interesting to know what UK Sport’s view on this is. Was 2008 just the completion of the first tranche leading up to the ultimate goal of London 2012 or beyond?

Whatever the answers to those last questions, it is a fundamental tenet of both project and programme management that success is defined and agreed up front as part of the project or programme business case. In the case of programmes - by the expected benefits to be delivered and in the case of projects - by the success criteria that the project manager will be judged against and the benefits the sponsor must deliver (assuming the project it is not part of a strategic programme).

The acronym SMART is often used when defining what success means.

What is important about SMART is what the letters stand for i.e.

Specific, Measurable, Agreed (not achievable which is too similar to realistic), Realistic and Time-bound. In addition to success or objectives being described in SMART terms, it is also essential (as defined explicitly in PRINCETM) to apply tolerances that make it clear the acceptable range within which a result can fall. We have written before about the dangers of relying on single point estimates when ranges are more realistic (see the Lucid Thoughts Driven to Precision parts I and II) – this is totally relevant here. The UK athletics team clearly had a ‘**minimum 5 golds**’ target that some might think is a little harsh. Hopefully there were also targets for other medals, numbers of people in finals when we haven’t had anyone for years, personal best times etc. If Michael Phelps had not achieved 8 gold medals in the pool (which he almost did not by the narrowest possible margin), was that failure?

The fine line between success and failure however can be seen throughout the sporting world; just take a look at what goes on in the English Football Premier League to see how fine it is. Project managers (team managers) are sacked almost weekly due to underperformance, or (with two examples in this last week from Newcastle and West Ham United) because the Manager felt disempowered to manage to achieve the agreed success criteria by their sponsor and wider management team.

Fortunately, most of us don’t work in the high-emotion fuelled world of sport, where the expectations of stakeholders can mean that what seems like success to us is interpreted as wider failure. But maybe there are some lessons to learn from these sporting examples that we can draw for our own projects?

- *Is success really understood by all stakeholders?*
- *Who will judge your success or failure in the final analysis: are they sufficiently bought in to the targets and tolerances that have been set.*
- *Are your targets realistic (based on past data)*
- *If your project is a ‘stand-alone’ change, how is the project success*

... tied into the wider organisational benefits?

- *If your project is part of a programme, what are the criteria that would make a project success also a programme success?*
- *What processes are in place to make sure that your targets are always appropriate and keep a pace of changing circumstances?*

The path to successful project and programme management is never smooth, but it can be altogether smoother if we are pedantic about getting success criteria defined measurably, with tolerances, in a specific, realistic and time-bound fashion – and agreed with all relevant stakeholders.

Perhaps with this in place the line between success and failure will become wider.

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