Pracademic Project Management: Super Performance Plans Using Holistic Project Planning Methodologies[1,2]

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Abstract

Project Management is based on the application of knowledge, skills, tools, and techniques to meet stakeholders project activities and requirements to achieve specific goals within a set timeframe and budget. Additionally, there are project phases that start with initiating and planning the scope, goals and milestones to meet project objectives. At its core, the step of planning is the backbone of any successful project no matter what field you are leading and managing. Plans are essential to understand the day to day activities and the path forward. They require a certain level of flexibility for change, accountability for obligation responsibility and finally a comprehensive, systems-thinking approach that treats projects as interconnected systems rather than isolated tasks.

In other words, a Holistic Project Planning (HPP) technique is required that emphasizes a clear articulated understanding of how project elements impact each other, aligning stakeholder priorities, and adapting to changing conditions to achieve stakeholder and customer value. The additional feature of VUCA (Volatility, Uncertainty, Complexity, Ambiguity) must be embraced for risk and opportunity planning scenarios. The critical requirements to close a project and provide customer deliverables are directly linked to the contextual awareness of a tailored holistic project plan.

Keywords: Project Management, Planning, Holistic Project Plan, Micro-Planning, Pomodoro Planning Technique, Project Planning Flowscape.

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Introduction

The purpose of this paper is to provide a project management perspective on the importance of project planning. You may have heard the popular phrase, *"Hope is not a plan,"* which highlights that positive thinking alone cannot replace actionable and deliberate planning. In project management, this statement is truer than ever in our current environment. Given the increasing complexity of technical projects required across modern technologies, there is a critical need for a solid execution plan. As previously described, the VUCA elements of complexity and ambiguity necessitate a clear understanding of technical challenges related to hardware, software & application design, development, testing, and demonstration.

The PMI (Project Management Institute) has identified that projects lacking a clear plan for closure are highly likely to encounter misunderstandings regarding project deliverables. Operational disruption and the inability to ensure resources are in the right place, at the right time, performing the right activities, often occur when planning is insufficient or misaligned with project needs. A goal or objective without a plan is merely a *wish*. As a project manager, your responsibility includes developing an achievable plan, managing the plan's tasks, subtasks, and milestones, and measuring progress against that plan. These three planning activities are essential components of effective project management and leadership.

To clearly understand the distinction between the terms *strategy* and *plan*, it is necessary to establish operational definitions:

- **Strategy** – A high-level, actionable approach designed to achieve one or more project goals under conditions of uncertainty.
- **Plan** – A detailed method or set of project actions formulated in advance to achieve a specific goal, objective, or outcome.

Thus, plans exist within a broader strategy. A commonly cited motivational maxim states that one should *"Plan the work and work the plan"* to achieve success.

Within the concept of a *plan*, two additional terms warrant further exploration:

- **Strategic Project Planning** – A systematic process of aligning project objectives, scope, and resource allocation with an organization's long-term goals, mission, and purpose.
- **Tactical Project Planning** – The process of translating strategic plans into specific, actionable, short-term activities. It serves as the bridge between project goals and objectives and day-to-day execution.

Each of these planning activities is required within project management planning efforts, although they occur at different times and levels of detail.

Planning Development

To develop a project plan, the project team must decompose the scope identified in the customer contract, the Work Breakdown Structure (WBS), and relevant stakeholder process documentation. Creating an achievable plan requires that the project objectives be conceptually feasible and supported by defined project start and end dates (i.e., estimated completion date) as well as an accurate preliminary budget.

Managing a project plan requires both leadership and management competencies. Ultimately, the project manager is responsible for execution, including assigning appropriate human resources to project activities. This responsibility may involve hiring new personnel or utilizing matrixed resources drawn from other organizational projects.

Another essential characteristic of project planning is the ability to determine whether a project is performing on schedule, measured by the Schedule Performance Index (SPI), and within cost expectations, measured by the Cost Performance Index (CPI), based on earned value management practices. This typically requires translating the project plan into a waterfall-structured Gantt chart that identifies the project's critical path. Establishing a project baseline is necessary to define realistic timelines, measure performance, and ensure accountability.

Major disruptions or deficiencies within the planning process may require significant replanning efforts. The project plan becomes the backbone of project success, while risk management functions as the integrating mechanism that holds the project together. Hoping for success is insufficient; a reasonable level of certainty is expected from disciplined planning activities.

From a communication perspective, clearly articulating expectations to team members regarding accountability, performance milestones, and task sequencing creates an efficient operational flow. A project culture based solely on iterative "stop-and-figure-it-out" decision making can disrupt momentum and negatively affect project progress.

Over Planning

Over Planning a project can be as damaging as relying solely on optimism that project tasks will be completed successfully. Excessive planning may waste critical human resources by developing artificial planning artifacts that may never be required. The VUCA characteristic of uncertainty must therefore be balanced with practical necessity.

Effective plans should include contingency pathways or decision "on-and-off-ramps" while avoiding a catastrophic "sky is falling" mentality. If potential consequences are truly severe, project cancellation may become necessary. Many project contracts include force majeure ("Act of God") clauses that allow termination under extraordinary circumstances. Although difficult,

project cancellation occurs frequently within complex projects and may require formal failure designation procedures. These discussions should occur with customer stakeholders once a baseline plan has been established or is undergoing approval.

The concept of a perfect plan is unrealistic. Unforeseen internal and external influences inevitably require modifications throughout execution. Excessive effort devoted to creating a "perfect" plan often represents inefficient use of time. Instead, developing organizational capacity to transition rapidly to contingency or alternative plans provides greater value.

Organizations that embrace planning flexibility demonstrate increased openness to change and improved opportunities for effectiveness and efficiency. Such environments promote collaboration, shared understanding of current and future activities, and proactive discussions using "what-if" scenario analysis to explore risks, issues, and potential workarounds.

Traditional Project Planning

Traditional project planning originated in early twentieth-century managerial practices, particularly through the development of Gantt charts designed to optimize time and resource utilization. These practices evolved into the Program Evaluation and Review Technique (PERT), developed by the U.S. Navy in collaboration with Booz Allen Hamilton and Lockheed during the Polaris missile program. The Critical Path Method (CPM), developed in the 1950s by Morgan Walker at DuPont and James Kelley at Remington Rand, further advanced planning capabilities by identifying task sequences essential to project completion.

Traditional planning emphasizes detailed upfront planning, fixed scope, comprehensive documentation, and limited tolerance for change. Projects operating under this model typically maintain defined requirements, scope boundaries, and budget constraints. However, rigidity may produce inaccurate early estimates and limit customer feedback until late development stages, increasing risks of scope creep, schedule delays, and challenges in meeting contractual quality requirements.

Flexible Planning

An alternative project philosophy embraces flexible planning approaches grounded in Agile and Lean methodologies. These approaches emphasize customer collaboration, adaptability, and organizational cultures that accept change as an expected condition rather than an exception.

In Agile environments, customer requirements evolve throughout project execution, and development activities focus on delivering value aligned with emerging needs rather than strictly following a linear waterfall process. Project scope adjustments may occur with reduced contractual barriers, allowing planning activities to support continuous refinement.

Lean project environments introduce collaborative planning tools such as sprints and Kanban boards, enabling iterative planning and workflow visualization. Flexible planning frameworks recognize that change is inevitable. While traditional waterfall methods intentionally maintain rigidity to prevent uncontrolled expansion ("gold plating"), modern project environments often combine structured requirements with organizational agility to pivot when necessary.

Such pivots may require replanning and stakeholder approval due to baseline impacts. Flexible planning reframes recognize change as an opportunity rather than solely a risk. When effectively managed, adaptive planning can improve technical feasibility, shorten schedules, and reduce overall project costs.

Flexible planning often operates effectively within projectized matrix organizational structures where stakeholders possess authority to approve replanning efforts. Alternative structures, including stage-gate or spiral development models, may restrict changes until designated phase transitions. Ultimately, flexible planning expands the range of possibilities for achieving project success.

Pomodoro Planning Technique

In any planning activity, the effective use of time and efficiency must be addressed. Creating an environment for planning that optimizes cognitive structure and capabilities is essential. To minimize the haphazard nature of planning, the Pomodoro technique can be used with individuals or teams.

The Pomodoro Technique was invented in 1987 by Francesco Cirillo as a method to focus studying or cognitive effort through a series of four 25-minute work intervals using a tomato-shaped kitchen timer. At the completion of each 25-minute timed work session, a 5-minute break is taken before repeating the cycle. After completing four Pomodoro sessions, a longer 15–30 minute break is recommended. This productivity framework has been widely accepted as a method for preventing burnout and mental fatigue while reducing distractions.

The technique works by aligning with ultradian rhythms, breaking planning efforts into manageable 20-30 minute cycles that enhance focus. Completing four Pomodoro sessions typically requires approximately two hours, producing disciplined output while minimizing interruptions. If an interruption occurs that interferes with a Pomodoro session, the session is considered void and should be repeated.

The use of a Pomodoro Planning Technique as part of Holistic Project Planning (HPP) ensures focused planning efforts through the use of micro teams consisting of two to five individuals engaged in plan development. While small teams may consist of five to ten members, a micro team is smaller and more informal. The use of multiple micro teams is particularly effective for complex or technical planning efforts. These teams can concentrate on specific technical planning areas and be disbanded once the planning activity is completed.

The primary advantage of the Pomodoro timed planning technique is the creation of a focused window of time dedicated to a specific planning activity without interruption, thereby improving efficiency. The 5-minute break following each Pomodoro allows cognitive recovery and mental relaxation. After completing a two-hour (four-cycle) planning session, a longer 15-30 minute break is recommended.

A visual representation of the sequence appears as follows:

- Introduction of the planning subject (5-10 minutes)
- 1st Pomodoro timed event (25 minutes)
- Break (5 minutes)
- 2nd Pomodoro timed event (25 minutes)
- Break (5 minutes)
- 3rd Pomodoro timed event (25 minutes)
- Break (5 minutes)
- 4th Pomodoro timed event (25 minutes)
- Final break (15-30 minutes)
- Review data and planning details to structure the plan

The Pomodoro Technique is recommended for all Holistic Project Planning steps. A Holistic Project Plan (HPP) is not intended to be developed in a single sitting due to the multiple interconnected activities required. Many HPP steps require additional detailed or granular planning. To accomplish this, planners may need to develop a series of micro-plans.

Micro-Planning

Micro-planning has traditionally supported a bottom-up approach for mapping detailed project tasks, sub-tasks, and objectives that define the scheduling of work. The Gantt chart, developed in

1910, served as a foundational micro-planning tool by introducing visual timelines for tasks, dependencies, and milestones. This evolution was followed by Scientific Management techniques based on time-and-motion studies and later by Program Evaluation and Review Technique (PERT) and Work Breakdown Structure (WBS) methodologies for managing larger projects.

What has not been fully embraced is the need for micro-planning in areas characterized by high risk, uncertainty, and volatility. These elements of VUCA (volatility, uncertainty, complexity, and ambiguity) create instability within project plans and require flexible representations of short-term, day-to-day activities.

By incorporating baseline start and stop times for each task, planners can better understand work scheduling across shifts, including weekends and non-working periods such as vacations or holidays. Additionally, recording actual start and stop dates and times during execution enables manual estimation of a "poor man's" earned value assessment.

A micro-plan, illustrated in the image below, demonstrates the steps required to plant a tree, a seemingly simple task. Review of the micro-plan visually indicates that the activity of adding fertilizer to the hole and mixing it with soil is only 50% complete. This manual tracking method highlights a performance issue. In this scenario, fertilizer supplies were exhausted, requiring procurement before work could continue, as illustrated in Figure 1.0.

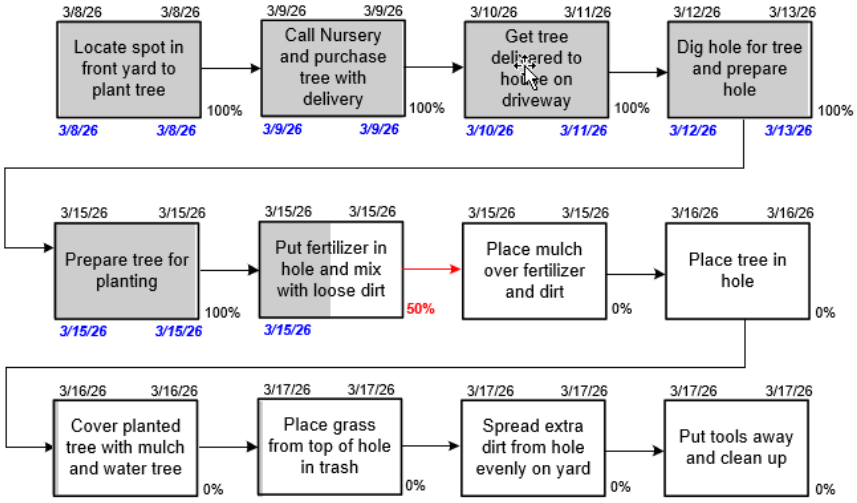

***Figure 1.0* – Plant a Tree Micro-Plan**

This project visualization is similar to Tony Buzan's "Time Boxing" technique, in which planning time is allocated at a more granular level so that the project manager can review and adjust small tasks efficiently. The use of micro-planning and its resulting output representation can serve as an early warning system for determining whether the project is on track or behind schedule, including

the magnitude of delay and the precise location of issues. Additionally, the chart visualization of the plan can be modified to incorporate decision points, branch into multiple task paths, and expand each block into additional sub-blocks to represent more detailed steps when required.

Micro-planning is a valuable tool for illustrating segments of an overall project plan but should be used selectively and concentrated in high-risk project areas, technically complex interfaces, or where multiple project paths converge. Applying micro-planning across an entire large-scale project would be an inefficient use of planning resources. The combined use of the Pomodoro Technique and micro-planning can significantly enhance project planning effectiveness. Increasing clarity, feasibility, and collaborative buy-in from customers and stakeholders requires elevating traditional project planning to a higher-level approach referred to as Holistic Project Planning.

Holistic Project Planning

If we examine the components of a Holistic Project Plan (HPP), there are seven conceptual characteristics that define its planning philosophy. These extend traditional project planning elements by incorporating additional systemic and cognitive dimensions:

- **Intention** – Identify the objective, purpose, and needs.
- **Direction** – Establish the path and roadmap to project success.
- **Focus** – Assess current perspectives and mindsets.
- **Details** – Identify the elements required for execution.
- **Handshakes** – Define connections, intersections, and interdependencies.
- **Achievements** – Evaluate goals and milestones.
- **Challenges** – Identify risks, including both anticipated (known) and unanticipated (unknown) risks.

The Holistic Project Planning process proposed here incorporates perspectives from a "flowscape" model and holistic systems thinking into a concise project planning framework. This framework enables clearer understanding of the connections and interdependencies within a project planning effort. The first additional layer of clarity includes the philosophy of a holistic project planning flowscape, which is illustrated in Figure 2.0.

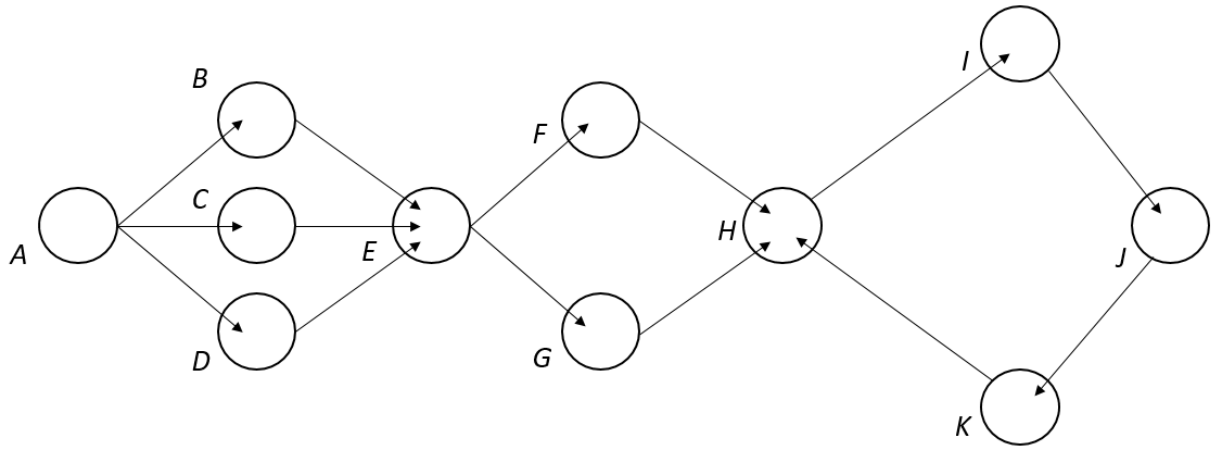

Figure 2.0 - Holistic Project Planning Flowscape

A "flowscape" is a visual method developed by Edward De Bono in his publication *Water Logic*. It is a way to identify process flows that include both logical perceptions and factual cognitive elements. The flowscape philosophy holds that multiple or alternative perceptions can be true simultaneously. A perception is defined as a sensory experience of the world. It is an interpretive cognitive representation of the surrounding environment. These perceptions can be mapped to identify how they lead from one to another, thereby revealing an internal worldview.

If we review Figure 2.0, *Holistic Project Planning Flowscape*, it provides the opportunity to graphically visualize the "flow" or sequence of steps required to move from the start of a planning event to its completion. The statement that "perception creates reality" is central to this conceptual view of planning. The steps illustrated begin at a central point labeled "A" and expand or splinter into "B," "C," and "D," which then converge into a collector point labeled "E." The flow then continues from "E" and splinters again into "F" and "G," which subsequently converge into another collector point labeled "H."

This is followed by a chained logic structure flowing from "H" to "I," from "I" to "J," from "J" to "K," and finally from "K" back to "H," forming a cyclical feedback loop. These eleven nodes representing flow perceptions are defined as follows:

- **A** – Identify project goal
- **B** – Identify major project tasks
- **C** – Identify project sub-tasks
- **D** – Identify project milestones
- **E** – Create initial project plan
- **F** – Identify and map commitments

- **G** – Resource-load project plan
- **H** – Create formal project plan
- **I** – Identify and adjust plan for negative risks
- **J** – Adjust plan for VUCA elements
- **K** – Identify and adjust plan for positive opportunities

The flowscape view of this planning process highlights the interconnected and interdependent nature of a Holistic Project Plan (HPP). When interpreted as a systems flow, this model can be translated into the systems representation shown in Figure 3.0 below.

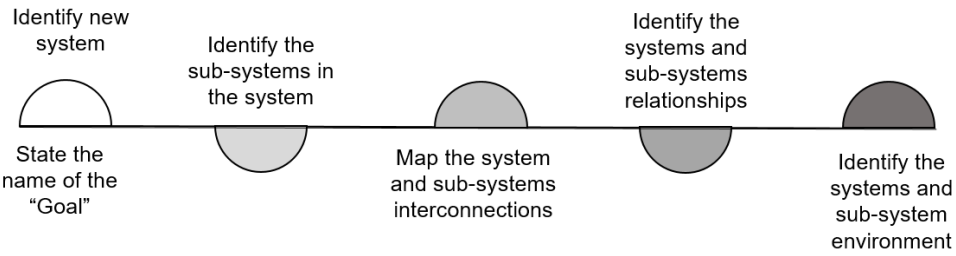

Figure 3.0 - Holistic Project Planning Systems Flow

A systems flow diagram is a visual planning representation of how data or processes interact within a system to transform input relationships into outputs. This type of flow is commonly depicted as sequential boxes with directional arrows indicating the hierarchy and progression of the process flow.

The Holistic Project Planning systems diagram simplifies the planning process into a five-step sequence that flows from left to right along a timeline, based on systems thinking logic. This systems flow for creating a plan begins with identifying the system by defining the "goal." This perspective of the planning process decomposes the system into systems, subsystems, interconnections, relationships, and environmental contexts.

When integrating and blending both the flowscape and the holistic flow perspectives, a Holistic Project Planning Process emerges that captures a multi-tiered structure of five integrated steps with a hierarchical flow. This process begins with "sketching a plan outline" and evolves through the development of an initial plan, pre-plan refinement, and re-planning with additional detail. It further incorporates the establishment of contingency plans, the integration of commitments and resource allocation, adjustments for VUCA conditions, and ultimately the inclusion of both risk and opportunity-based outputs. This integrated systems representation is illustrated in Figure 4.0.

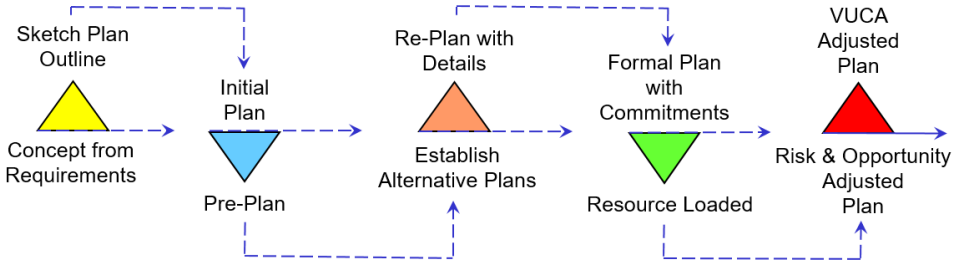

Figure 4.0 - Holistic Project Planning Process Steps

The Holistic Project Planning Process establishes a planning approach consisting of five multi-layered, comprehensive steps that illustrate an interconnected system rather than isolated tasks, subtasks, milestones, or objectives. The process flows in a linear direction from left to right, creating a series of distinct phased reviews and planning elements. Each of the five steps includes a defined set of subtasks and considerations that must be addressed before progressing to the next phase.

The time required to complete each phase is determined by the project manager in collaboration with supporting personnel involved in defining and evolving the Holistic Project Plan. For complex projects, a best-case estimate may range from approximately 40 to 400 hours, depending on project complexity and the organization's level of commitment to the planning process. The first step in creating a Holistic Project Plan is to sketch an outline of the project plan, as shown in Figure 5.0.

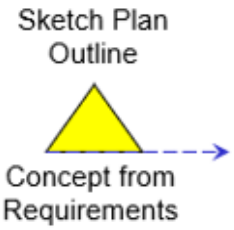

Figure 5.0 - Sketch Plan Outline: Concept from Requirements Steps

This starting step involves the decomposition of customer or stakeholder requirements into a defined project goal. A simple statement must be created that identifies the ultimate project objective, and it should be clearly documented. This statement must be "mapped" to the requirements and pass the "giggle test." In other words, it must be logically sound (achievable), non-contradictory to the organization's morals and values (alignment), and compliant with internal and external processes, including safety standards.

Achievability refers to the extent to which the project is realistic and feasible within the constraints of available resources, budget, and schedule. When evaluating alignment with the organization, the intent is to ensure that project goals, outcomes, and daily activities directly support the company's operational objectives, tactical purpose, and long-term vision or strategic direction.

The second step in creating a Holistic Project Plan (HPP) is the development of the initial plan and the pre-plan, as shown in Figure 6.0.

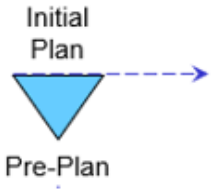

Figure 6.0 - Initial Plan: Pre-Plan Steps

The pre-plan determines the feasibility of the project goal or objective concept. It should outline the project's viability, scope, and objectives. Additionally, it defines the project-specific objectives derived from customer contractual requirements, outlines preliminary timelines, and establishes the baseline budget.

The pre-plan is then refined to construct the initial project plan. This refined document identifies project assumptions and expectations and defines the project deliverables. Finally, it establishes the baseline for tracking project cost and schedule performance. This plan should reflect the information contained in the Work Breakdown Structure (WBS).

At this stage, the document should map directly to the Project Charter and identify all stakeholders, along with the methods for communication with each.

The third step in the creation of a Holistic Project Plan (HPP) is the re-plan with detailed development and the establishment of alternative plans, as shown in Figure 7.0.

Figure 7.0 - Re-Plan with Details: Establish Alternate Plans Steps

Once the initial plan has been constructed, it should be distributed to all project stakeholders, customer representatives, and supplier management contacts involved in external procurement contracts. The re-plan should incorporate essential feedback from all stakeholders, reflecting any constraints or required changes to the original scope in order to identify significant deviations and ensure the plan remains achievable.

Once this version of the re-plan has been completed, contingency plans should be developed for known negative risks, as well as action plans for opportunities that may enhance quality, minimize schedule delays, or reduce project costs. Any project schedules that have been created should be reviewed to identify elements, tasks, or subtasks that merge or intersect. Interfaces between these aligned steps should be classified as higher risk and may require backup plans in the event of failure or issues. This re-plan is now ready to transition into the development of the formal project plan.

The fourth step in Holistic Project Planning (HPP) is the development of the formal plan, followed by the allocation of resources, as shown in Figure 8.0

Figure 8.0 - Formal Plan with Commitments: Resource Loaded Steps

The formal plan requires review by all internal and external project stakeholders to obtain commitments and load resources. To secure commitments, an approved baseline and binding agreements are required that clearly define how the project will be executed, controlled, and monitored for both positive and negative performance outcomes. The project team, sponsors, and key stakeholders must be in full agreement on the plan prior to resource loading.

The next step is to construct the official project schedule, assign RACI (Responsible, Accountable, Consulted, Informed) roles and responsibilities, and determine the key human resources required. These resources must be evaluated against the schedule to identify any constraint conflicts that require management. Additionally, if required personnel are not available, the organization must either assign matrixed resources or hire permanent or contract personnel.

The formal plan must be balanced to account for scheduled work hours and potential overtime allocations. Finally, the formal plan should align fully with the project scope statement and contract budget allocations.

The fourth and final review of the plan includes a VUCA and risk-and-opportunity-adjusted set of planning steps, as shown in Figure 9.0.

Figure 9.0 - VUCA Adjusted Plan: Risk & Opportunity Adjusted Plan Steps

The last two elements of the planning effort accommodate the perspective of instability within the project plan due to unknown factors. These factors can be categorized using the VUCA framework (volatility, uncertainty, complexity, and ambiguity), a concept popularized in leadership theory by Warren Bennis and Burt Nanus in the 1980s. Each VUCA dimension has a distinct impact on the stability of a project plan. This perspective requires the project team to examine the current environment and interpret how each factor may influence project outcomes.

At this stage, the developed plan should be reviewed to identify required adjustments related to:

- **Volatility** – Changes in customer requirements, supply chain disruptions, technology shifts, and environmental changes that require modifications to initial planning assumptions.
- **Uncertainty** – Variability in task durations due to vague or incomplete technical requirements, new software implementations, and unexpected loss or turnover of key personnel, all of which may require adjustments to project execution.
- **Complexity** – Changes in interfaces or integration efforts across cross-functional dependencies, conflicting stakeholder priorities, and evolving system interactions that may transform initially simple tasks into complex or unmanageable ones.
- **Ambiguity** – Changes in requirements due to vague language, uncertain timelines, undefined resource allocations, and unclear performance metrics, all of which may require clarification of project objectives or goals.

These factors require forward-looking analysis to determine whether any VUCA characteristics will necessitate tailoring or adapting the project plan. Each element may also require the development of splinter or contingency plans to address potential impacts.

The final two adjustments required to complete a Holistic Project Plan are based on anticipated positive (opportunity) and negative (risk or issue) impacts. For high-severity "red risks" identified in the project risk register, appropriate risk responses should be developed based on probability,

impact, and feasibility, thereby establishing formal risk protocols within the project plan. Finally, identified opportunities should be evaluated to develop strategies that optimize project performance, including cost reduction, schedule improvement, and innovation enhancement. The integration of VUCA analysis along with risk and opportunity adjustments enables the completion of a fully developed Holistic Project Plan.

Conclusion

Traditional planning is based on a serial process of waterfall-style logical sequencing. It is historically developed from selected inputs provided by project stakeholders and establishes a hierarchical planning structure. Once the plan is created and baselined, performance against the plan is measured, monitored, and evaluated. However, this approach offers limited flexibility for change. The dynamic nature of change often renders project objectives obsolete even before the initiation phase begins.

The limitations of traditional project planning can be traced to its reliance on a waterfall sequence developed in functional silos and executed without sufficient adaptability. Contemporary project managers are required to possess socio-technical competencies in addition to general management and leadership skills. The adoption of a Holistic Project Plan increases the likelihood of improved project performance and enhances the probability of project closure aligned with established performance metrics and stakeholder contractual requirements.

Finally, by decomposing planning into a series of interconnected steps that reflect the evolving nature of a project, organizations can improve adaptability to change. When requirements are fluid or undergoing rapid transformation, the need for a stable yet flexible planning process becomes essential. The Holistic Project Plan is not developed in isolation; rather, it is constructed as a collaborative effort among all stakeholders. It supports an iterative planning cycle that pauses at each of the five steps within the Holistic Planning Process.

Each step functions as a structured checklist of interconnected project elements that, when completed, collectively form a systemic framework translating achievable goals into actionable and measurable outcomes, ultimately supporting successful project closure. Additionally, incorporating the time-boxing structure of the Pomodoro Technique and the detailed structuring of micro-planning can further enhance focus and clarity, improving the accuracy of task, subtask, goal, and objective definition.

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Dr. Dale S. Deardorff worked for Boeing Integrated Defense Systems and Space Propulsion Development divisions as a Project and Program manager for over 20 years. He worked for the Lockheed Burbank "Skunk" works and Aircraft division for almost 10 years and a high technology Valencia California start up for a couple of years. This 30 plus years' experience is a "Pracademic" blending of commercial, military, government, NASA and high technology organizations. Dale has taught Project Management "online" for multiple universities as an adjunct instructor since 2003 and continues to contribute to project management methodologies and philosophies as a current thought leader.

He created the Rocky Peak Leadership Center in 2010 and has helped modern organizations as an enterprise and executive consultant in the areas of thinking methodologies, and Innovation

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