



## **It's all about winning**

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# Contents

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<b>Introduction</b>	<b>3</b>
<b>1 Getting the quality right</b>	<b>3</b>
<b>2 Delivering to the business</b>	<b>4</b>
<b>3 Doing the right work</b>	<b>4</b>
<b>4 Knowing who does what</b>	<b>4</b>
<b>5 It won't stand still</b>	<b>4</b>
<b>6 Getting ahead of the game</b>	<b>5</b>
<b>7 Losing sight of the goal</b>	<b>5</b>
<b>Conclusion</b>	<b>5</b>
<b>Acknowledgements</b>	<b>6</b>
<b>Trademarks and statements</b>	<b>6</b>

## Introduction

There seem to be more of us working on projects today than ever before. Departments and organizations have steadily become leaner and we have reached the point where further activity cannot be undertaken without additional resources being made available. Managing these extra resources has led to a project approach to our work.

It is also true that many of us working in technical environments have been organizing ourselves around projects for a long time. Add to that the other departments that have adopted the project as a means of getting work done, and it means that there are a lot of projects running!

But there is a problem. Our chosen vehicle for getting things done – a project – is an endeavour with an uncertain outcome. Projects often fail or deliver only part of their intentions. This brings us to my particular obsession: that the job of the project manager is to *win*. It is not just to try hard; it is not just to do our best; we are not in the Olympics, where the phrase has always been 'not the winning but the taking part'. My favourite definition of project management is something that someone once said to me and that I have always remembered:

*The job of the project manager is to create an environment where the team can win.*

In projects, people will work hard whether they win or lose. Our job as project manager is to make sure that hard work has the best possible chance of delivering success. Given my stated goal, why do I like PRINCE2®? The answer is simple: it helps me win. Let's review PRINCE2 as a means of winning.

The first thing to note is that PRINCE2 allows us to clearly look at winning in different ways. In a PRINCE2 project there are four distinct ways to demonstrate a win:

- The defined **acceptance criteria**, which include the project's performance targets, are met.
- The **products** that the project creates are accepted by our customers.
- The **benefits** identified in the business case are delivered.
- The **promises** that we make about how we will run the project, captured in the project initiation documentation, are kept.

This clarity alone is a huge step forward. The saddest question you could ever hear a project manager ask is, 'We've finished; do you like it?'. It begs the answer 'Yes, but ...' and as soon as we hear the 'but' we are lost. There is no more time, money or indeed any other resource to deal with the 'but'. We need to be able to say, 'We've finished; it's brilliant ... Say thanks!'. If we are going to be that arrogant we need to be right and we had better be able to prove it. PRINCE2 makes winning visible and measurable.

Before we go into more detail on how PRINCE2 helps us win, can I ask you three questions? Firstly, are you reading this and feeling a little uncomfortable with the focus on the project

manager winning? If so, let me ask you another question. If the project manager cannot make winning visible, how do the people on the team, who have worked hard to deliver success, get the credit and recognition that they deserve? The job of the project manager is twofold: to succeed and to be seen to succeed. Only then can the effort of the team be appreciated and recognized appropriately.

The third question is this: how can the stakeholders win if the project manager doesn't? When the project manager wins, we all win! Now, back to my obsession.

Not only does PRINCE2 provide a process model that gives guidance and checklists for every step of the journey; the seven PRINCE2 themes explicitly help us to deliver success. They are: quality, plans, risks, change, progress, business case and organization. PRINCE2 gives clear guidance on how to overcome seven problems we have to face in the real world: defining quality; defining benefits; identifying scope; roles; change; risk; and losing sight of the goal.

## 1 Getting the quality right

### How does the quality theme help us to win?

- The project product description contains customer quality expectations and acceptance criteria. These are captured and developed right from the beginning. This is the best possible implementation of Steven Covey's advice to 'begin with the end in mind'<sup>1</sup>.
- Individual product descriptions guide the building and testing of each product created by the project with their own specific quality criteria.
- An unbroken chain of logic is developed that takes us from policy statements about how the project will manage quality, right down to who is doing what today to implement it.

### Real-world problem

Quality is often discussed but rarely defined clearly. Reference to the appropriate quality standards and working practices that follow good custom and practice is usually our best guide.

### Why PRINCE2 wins

It focuses on the actions necessary to deliver 'fit for purpose' products in this project. It is influenced by the appropriate standards; it utilizes good custom and practice; but it defines in detail what must be achieved, how to measure it and who needs to be involved. There is nothing woolly about PRINCE2's approach to quality. If we begin with a clear statement of what the project will build and the quality criteria that must be met, the exercise becomes one where we just find the stepping stones to get there. Everyone knows what to do and how to contribute.

1 *The Seven Habits of Highly Effective People*, Stephen Covey, Simon & Schuster Ltd, 2004.

## 2 Delivering to the business

### How does the business case theme help us to win?

- The benefits of the project are clearly defined in measurable terms.
- A benefit review plan is created in the project that describes when, by whom, how and compared to what the benefits will be measured.
- There is clear accountability for the realization of the benefits.

### Real-world problem

Projects define benefits that are often overly optimistic and reflect aspirations rather than clearly intended results. It is rarely clear who will be held accountable for the delivery and exactly how these benefits will be measured (remember, by the time most benefits will be realized the project and the project manager will be long gone!)

### Why PRINCE2 wins

Including the planning of benefit reviews, which are held during and after the project, in the work of the project develops an active attitude to benefit realization. Although the benefits may come after the project, we need to measure them, and who is responsible for them is a question that can be answered here and now, in the project. You can win because the benefits are real, practically achievable and measurable. They are mapped as the consequences of customers using products that have been built as fit for purpose.

## 3 Doing the right work

### How does the plans theme help us to win?

- Product-based planning can be used as a supplement to traditional activity-based planning; you start with the products and then identify the activities necessary to create, test, manage and report on the creation of those products.
- Each product is identified with its own quality criteria.
- The product checklist acts as a reporting tool.

### Real-world problem

Hidden or missing tasks can cause us to underestimate the scope of the project.

### Why PRINCE2 wins

In addition to describing a planning approach that facilitates good communication, effective control and tracking, PRINCE2 also integrates the planning activities into the real work of the project. The job of a project is not just to be busy; it is to create something. Keeping that as the centre of our focus is very important. Product breakdown structures identify the scope explicitly; product descriptions identify the detail explicitly; and

the product checklist (an alternative presentation of information in the project plan) supports the reporting and communication of the creation and approval of products. With these tools we can see we are making progress.

## 4 Knowing who does what

### How does the organization theme help us to win?

- There is a real project management team, not just a project manager on their own.
- Each role has defined and agreed responsibilities.

### Real-world problem

Responsibility without authority is often the lot of the project manager. There is sometimes a lack of clarity about the roles in the project, and about who should be making which decisions.

### Why PRINCE2 wins

Everyone in the project management team knows their role, authority and responsibilities. These are agreed at the beginning and reviewed throughout the project to ensure that they are, and remain, effective. Teams win: we are at the top of the food chain not because we are the biggest and meanest thing in the wood, but because we got together and mugged the biggest and meanest thing in the wood. This approach still works today.

## 5 It won't stand still

### How does the change theme help us to win?

- A procedure for change control is explicitly agreed at the beginning of the project.
- Configuration management ensures that the project's products are controlled.
- Issues are managed, and in particular the project can control requests for change and off-specifications (errors, bugs and omissions).

### Real-world problem

Change is inevitable in any project and it is tempting to add features to the project's product scope. However, uncontrolled change prevents us from winning as the stakeholders may get something that is different from their expectations. Hence uncontrolled change jeopardizes our ability to say, 'We've finished; it's brilliant ... Say thanks!', because the stakeholders were expecting something very different.

### Why PRINCE2 wins

Change control and configuration management work together to deliver a controlled environment where products can be completed and any necessary changes can be assessed and approved before the change can occur. One of the straplines of

the film *Pirates of the Caribbean* was, 'Take what you can, give nothing back'. It is admittedly risky to develop management models based upon Hollywood film scripts, but if you think of it in terms of taking control of the products that you are creating then it is very good advice. We often make progress, but then give it back or lose it when completed products are updated or changed without the proper controls and authorizations.

## 6 Getting ahead of the game

### How does the risk theme help us to win?

- It allows us to identify, capture and control potential threats to the project's objectives.
- It enables working practices that proactively act against the most significant project threats.

### Real-world problem

Busy projects fall into a reactive stance when problems occur. We have so much on our plate here and now, with the things that *are* going wrong, that we get distracted from the things that have not happened yet and might never happen.

### Why PRINCE2 wins

When we follow PRINCE2 we should thoughtfully articulate the risks to the project. Having identified the causes of those risks we are able to recognize when threats to the project occur which may affect our ability to successfully deliver on the project's objectives. Risk management stops being just a generic good practice and becomes a refined tool to help us make sure we manage the things that can stop us from winning. Furthermore, risk management also identifies opportunities that will improve our prospects of winning and deliver greater benefits than initially predicted.

## 7 Losing sight of the goal

### How does the progress theme help us to win?

- It introduces management stages that keep our focus on the things that describe success.
- It guides us in setting tolerances that provide a key early warning mechanism to alert us to any divergence from our path to success.

### Real-world problem

Once a project has started it tends to fall into a pattern of decision dependency. This means that each choice we face is made in the context of the decisions already made. This can lead us to slowly drift away from our initial intentions and lose sight of the success criteria we spent our time trying to define at the beginning.

### Why PRINCE2 wins

PRINCE2 is an integrated solution that keeps all of the aspects of our work focused on our agreed criteria for success. All aspects of PRINCE2 link together to enable us to deliver our goals. As the project manager goes through stage boundaries and has to update and refresh our original intentions to the satisfaction of the Project Board, those intentions are kept in the forefront of our minds. Well-structured PRINCE2 projects don't drift; if they change it is because that change has been requested and approved.

## Conclusion

Don't adopt PRINCE2 just because it is a great example of best practice. Adopt it because it does everything it can to stack the odds in your favour when you are engaged in the delivery of an uncertain endeavour. Projects are, and will always remain, risky by their very nature; our job as project managers is to do what we can to facilitate success. Projects win because of the hard work carried out by the people working on them. Good project management helps those people succeed – and when they do, it makes that success visible.

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