Are We Making Project Management Too Complicated?

Opening

Welcome back to People, Process, Progress. I'm Kevin Pannell.

I've been thinking about a couple of things when it comes to the project management profession. First, have we made project management more complicated than it needs to be? And second, if organizations are serious about project management and the value it can bring, are they making the investments necessary to help their people succeed?

I've had the opportunity to work my way through the project management profession, from managing individual projects to leading project managers, building out project management standards, and helping develop an entire PMO.

Along the way, I've learned quite a bit about what works, what doesn't, and what I believe matters most. I've also learned that some of the best lessons in project management don't necessarily come from a textbook, a certification course, or a methodology. They come from working with people, making decisions, learning from mistakes, and figuring out how to get things done.

Today I want to share some of those experiences and talk about how we can continue improving the profession, supporting our people, and helping organizations deliver results without making the work more complicated than it needs to be.

My Journey Through Project Management

When I think about how I got started in project management, I actually go back to my time in the Navy.

I was the Senior Hospital Corpsman in the Intensive Care Unit at the National Naval Medical Center in Bethesda, Maryland. One of the first projects I remember taking on was standardizing the supply closet and the supply drawers in our ICU and Cardiac ICU patient rooms.

Before that, supplies weren't necessarily in the same place from one room to another. And when you're working in an ICU, particularly when you're taking care of critically ill patients, knowing where your supplies are matters. You don't want to spend valuable time searching through drawers or moving between rooms trying to find something you need.

So we standardized where things went. It was a relatively simple project, but it made our units more efficient and helped improve patient safety. Regardless of which room we were working in, we knew where to find what we needed.

Looking back, that's a great example of what project management should accomplish. We identified a problem, improved a process, and made it easier for people to do their jobs. And that was long before I had a PMP certification or a formal project management title.

As I moved further into the project management profession, I learned the value of structure, methodologies, and the guidance available to us. Especially early in your career, those things are important. They give you a foundation to build on and help you understand how to plan, organize, manage risks, communicate, and deliver projects.

But something I've learned over the years is that as project managers mature, and as organizations mature, our focus needs to evolve. We need to spend more time thinking about outcomes and what our customers and organizations actually need.

The documents, templates, and techniques we learn from project management books can be valuable, but we need to understand when to use them, how much detail is necessary, and whether they're actually helping us accomplish something.

That became even more important when I moved into PMO leadership.

As a project manager, you're primarily responsible for helping deliver your assigned projects. As a PMO leader, your responsibilities expand considerably. You're managing people, budgets, resources, and the overall project management capability of the organization.

You're helping determine which project managers are assigned to which projects, balancing the needs of the organization with the interests, experience, and professional development goals of your people. You're also responsible for establishing standards that work, standards that are consistent and repeatable without creating unnecessary burdens for project managers or the teams they're supporting.

And one of the things I've learned through that experience is that the people side of leadership matters tremendously.

When I look back at what I'm most proud of from leading a PMO, it's the relationships I've built with my team members and the trust we've developed. I want my people to know that I care more about them than I do about any individual project.

If someone on my team is ready for a new opportunity, even if that opportunity takes them somewhere else, I want to help them get there. I want to be a mentor, a resource, and someone they can continue to count on throughout their careers.

I've been fortunate to receive green leadership results through Press Ganey on two occasions. Those results mean a lot to me because they reflect the experiences and feedback of the people I've had the opportunity to lead.

And I recognize that there are times when people may not feel they have all the support they need from the larger organization. My responsibility as their leader is to listen, advocate for them, and do what I can to help.

I want them to know they can count on me.

That's something I've carried with me from my military service through emergency services and into project management leadership. Take care of your people, give them what they need to do their jobs, and help them grow.

And that brings me to something I've seen throughout my career. Sometimes, in our efforts to improve project management, we end up making it more complicated than it needs to be.

Have We Made Project Management Too Complicated?

I think sometimes we have.

Over the years, I've seen situations where we bring too many people into the conversation, create too many documents, schedule too many meetings, and establish committees to make decisions that could have been made much more efficiently.

There's a saying I've used over the years: You can plan in three minutes or three months.

What I mean by that is we can accomplish quite a bit in a short amount of time when we focus on what matters, get the right people involved, and make decisions. Or we can spend months discussing something, getting everyone's input, revisiting decisions, and trying to reach agreement through committees.

Now, I'm certainly not suggesting we rush through important decisions or leave out people who need to be involved. Some decisions require significant analysis, collaboration, and consideration of risks.

But we need to understand the difference between collaboration that adds value and collaboration that creates unnecessary work. Sometimes we need to get the right people together, have a productive conversation, make a decision, and move forward.

I think the same thing applies to project management processes.

We have a tremendous amount of information available to us as project management professionals. Methodologies, frameworks, templates, certifications, tools, and techniques. And those are valuable resources.

But if I were to strip away all the documentation and ask what makes someone an effective project manager, I would start with their ability to work with people.

Can they build relationships? Can they earn trust? Can they listen and understand what their customers and project teams need? Can they communicate clearly, help people work through challenges, and take ownership of getting a project completed?

Those are foundational skills.

I also believe project managers need to understand how different approaches to project delivery work. Whether we're using a traditional waterfall approach, Agile, or some combination of the two, we need to understand the basic flow of the work and how to apply the appropriate practices.

And we need to be comfortable operating in the gray areas.

Not everything in project management is going to have a perfectly defined process or a black-and-white answer. Sometimes you're going to have incomplete information, competing priorities, or circumstances that don't fit neatly into a methodology.

That's where experience, judgment, and relationships become particularly important.

As project managers, we need to take ownership of helping the entire project succeed. That doesn't mean doing everyone else's job. It means understanding what's happening across the project, identifying what needs attention, and helping the people involved move the work forward.

When it comes to building project management standards, I think we also need to listen to the people using them.

Are these processes helping our project managers? Are our customers and project teams finding them useful? Are they improving how we communicate, make decisions, and deliver results?

And most importantly, are we seeing better outcomes that meet the needs of our customers and organizations?

If the answer is yes, those are practices worth keeping and continuing to improve. If the answer is no, we need to be willing to make changes.

We shouldn't maintain a process simply because it's something we've always done or because it's described in a project management reference. We should understand why we're doing it and what value it's providing.

For me, that's really the point. Use the structure that helps, involve the people who need to be involved, make decisions, communicate clearly, and keep the work moving.

But there's another part of this conversation that's equally important. We can simplify processes and improve how we work, but if we don't invest in the people responsible for delivering projects, we're limiting what project management can accomplish.

If We Take Project Management Seriously, Invest in Its People

This is something I believe is fundamental to the success of project management in any organization.

If we're going to take project management seriously, we need to invest in the people doing the work. And that starts with having enough project managers to make a meaningful difference.

Organizations have projects underway today, projects they're considering for tomorrow, and investments they may be planning for next year. If we're serious about managing those investments effectively, we need to think about whether we have the project management capacity to support them.

That means having enough project managers to realistically support the current portfolio while maintaining the flexibility to take on new opportunities, unexpected projects, and future organizational priorities.

And it means having the right project managers assigned to the right work.

Different projects require different skills, levels of experience, and amounts of time. A project manager supporting a complex enterprise implementation may have very different demands than someone managing several smaller operational projects.

We need to understand those differences when we're assigning work and managing our teams.

Something else I believe strongly is that our project managers shouldn't be expected to operate at 100 percent capacity every day.

We need to give people room to breathe.

Projects ramp up, reach critical milestones, and eventually wind down. And as one project is wrapping up, another may be getting started. We need to account for those transitions, along with the unexpected issues that inevitably arise during project delivery.

If everyone is already fully committed, where does the capacity come from when something changes?

That's why I believe project management staffing and workload management need to be deliberate.

As a general planning point, I think three to four projects per project manager can be a reasonable ratio, depending on the complexity and demands of those projects. That's not a hard rule. Some projects require nearly all of a project manager's attention, while others can be managed alongside additional work.

But we need to start somewhere, and we need to make staffing decisions based on the actual workload.

And investing in people goes beyond hiring enough project managers.

We also need to support their professional development.

Throughout my time leading project managers, I've supported training opportunities, PMP recertification, PMI memberships, and participation in regional project management symposiums. We've participated in team-building activities and looked for opportunities to connect with other professionals in the field.

I think those things matter.

Project managers benefit from learning what others are doing, sharing experiences, developing new skills, and building relationships beyond their immediate organization. And as leaders, we should encourage those opportunities whenever we can.

But investing in our people also means paying attention to how they're doing.

One of the things I've tried to do consistently is review the balance of work across my team. I want to know what projects they're supporting, what challenges they're experiencing, and whether their workloads are manageable.

And I want to ask them directly: How are you doing? What do you need from me?

Those conversations are important.

We can look at resource management tools, schedules, and project assignments, but we also need to listen to the people doing the work. They can tell us things that don't always show up in a report.

And taking care of people also means helping them prepare for what's next.

What are their career goals? What do they want to accomplish? What experiences and opportunities can we provide to help them get there?

If someone on my team wants to become a PMO Director one day, I want to help prepare them for that. I want them to understand more than project schedules and Gantt charts. I want them to have opportunities to develop leadership skills, understand portfolio management, work with executives, make decisions, and grow professionally.

And if that growth eventually takes them somewhere else, that's okay.

Part of our responsibility as leaders is helping people prepare for the next opportunity, whether that's within our organization or somewhere else.

Now, there's another part of investing in project management that deserves attention, and that's organizational leadership.

A PMO needs a clear understanding of what work the organization is doing, what work is being considered, and what work should take priority.

That requires leaders to participate.

I believe organizations benefit from establishing a regular process for reviewing project and investment requests at different leadership levels. Ideally, we're having those conversations monthly, although the right cadence will depend on the organization and the decisions that need to be made.

The important thing is that we're consistently reviewing our priorities, our available resources, and the work we're asking people to take on.

We also need a visible, maintained backlog of potential projects and investments. That backlog should help leaders understand what's been requested, what's being evaluated, what's been prioritized, and what may be coming next.

And that information shouldn't exist only within the PMO. It needs to be understood by the leadership teams and departments the PMO supports, and where appropriate, by the broader organization.

When we have that level of engagement, we can make better decisions about where to assign our project managers, which investments to move forward, and when we're realistically able to take on additional work.

And this brings me back to three things I believe an effective PMO should help provide: visibility, predictability, and confidence.

Visibility into the work we're doing and the investments we're considering. Predictability in how we plan, prioritize, assign resources, and deliver projects. And confidence that the organization has the people, processes, and leadership engagement necessary to support successful outcomes.

Those things don't happen simply because an organization establishes a PMO. They develop over time through investment, collaboration, consistent practices, and a commitment to the people doing the work.

And when we make those investments, the next challenge is building a PMO that people understand, trust, and actually want to work with.

Building a PMO People Want to Work With

I've had the opportunity to build and improve project management capabilities over the years, and one of the first things I've learned is that you need to listen before you start making changes.

When I come into a PMO leadership role, I want to start with the people already doing the work.

What's working? What's not working? What do they need right now to be more successful?

I want to hear from the project managers themselves because they're the ones working with project teams, customers, and stakeholders every day.

From there, I want to understand the portfolio.

What projects are we working on? What information do we have about those projects? And does the information in our project management systems actually reflect what's happening?

That's an important question because if our project data doesn't reflect reality, it's difficult for leaders to make good decisions.

I also want to understand what standards and processes are already in place. What's being used? What's helping? And where are there opportunities for improvement?

Then I spend time talking with other leaders across the organization.

What do they need from the PMO? What's working from their perspective? Where are they experiencing challenges?

Once I've had those conversations and developed a better understanding of where things stand, I can start taking action.

And I think that's important. We need to listen, but we also need to follow through.

When it comes to building trust, I've found that reality-based conversations go a long way.

We need to be transparent about where the PMO is, where the overall portfolio stands, and what we believe needs to improve. That includes being objective about the challenges we're facing and being willing to acknowledge when things haven't gone well.

I don't think we do ourselves any favors by making everything look better than it actually is.

If something needs attention, let's talk about it. Let's understand what's happening and work together to make progress.

And throughout that process, we need to keep communication lines open. That applies to the project managers on our teams, the leaders we're supporting, and the people across the organization who are being asked to adopt new standards or ways of working.

Something else I believe strongly is that we need to recognize the people making that progress possible.

When we're building or maturing a PMO, our project managers are often learning new processes, adopting new tools, and helping others understand new expectations. That takes work.

And as PMO leaders, we should be giving our people credit for the progress they're making. We should be supporting them, advocating for them, and making sure they know we're there to help them succeed.

So how do we know whether a PMO is becoming successful?

Of course, we can look at project delivery metrics, portfolio performance, and the quality of the information we're providing.

But I also look for other signs.

Are the project managers on the team engaged? Are they willing to adopt changes and help improve how we work? Do they trust that their leadership is looking out for them?

And what are we hearing from people outside the PMO?

Are other departments asking what we're doing? Are they interested in participating in our processes or adopting some of the practices we've developed? Are leaders and colleagues interested in attending portfolio reviews or planning sessions to better understand how projects are being evaluated and prioritized?

I think those are meaningful indicators.

When people outside your team want to know how you make the dough, that's generally a pretty good sign.

It means they're seeing something of value and want to understand how it works.

And I believe we should welcome that interest.

Invite people into the process. Show them how things work. Help them understand the information we're using and how decisions are being made.

That's how we continue building relationships and improving project management across an organization.

Now, if I were building a PMO from the ground up today, I'd also want to include business analysis capability to support project intake and the work that happens before something officially becomes a project.

That early work matters.

Understanding the business need, evaluating requests, and helping leaders make informed investment decisions gives the PMO and the organization a stronger foundation.

And finally, I would want organizational leadership to communicate support for the direction we're moving.

When leaders reinforce expectations and help explain why we're adopting new standards or processes, it can make implementation easier.

But I've also learned that relationships and demonstrated results can be just as important.

Sometimes the most effective way to gain support is to work directly with people, show them how a process helps, and let them experience the benefits themselves.

As those relationships develop and people see tangible improvements, they become more willing to participate.

And that's ultimately what we're trying to accomplish. We're building a project management capability that people trust, understand, and want to work with.

Bringing It Together: People, Process, Progress

As we wrap up today's discussion, I want to bring everything back to the three words behind this podcast: People, Process, Progress.

And I want to start with people.

One of the most important lessons I've learned, from being a staff project manager to serving as a PMO Director, is that we have to take care of our people first.

Before we start talking about delivery goals, schedules, budgets, and project performance, we need to understand how our people are doing.

What's happening in their lives outside of work? Are they dealing with something difficult? Do they need us to step in and help cover some of their responsibilities for a while?

Do they feel supported by us as leaders and by the organization?

Those things matter.

I've always believed that we need to look at the whole person, not just the work they're assigned.

Now, let's talk about process.

If there's one thing I'd encourage PMO leaders to think about, it's whether the standards we're creating actually fit the organization and the people who need to use them.

We need to be careful that we don't overwhelm project managers, project teams, and business partners with processes and documentation.

Sometimes, when you're building a PMO, there isn't much structure in place. In those situations, following established project management practices and methodologies can provide a solid starting point.

Other times, there's already a framework in place, and the right approach is to combine what's working with new practices that can help the organization improve.

And occasionally, you may find that the existing structure simply isn't working and needs to be rebuilt.

I've experienced different versions of those situations throughout my career.

The important thing is understanding what the organization needs before deciding what to change.

We want consistency, but we also need flexibility.

And that brings us to progress.

We have plenty of ways to measure project and portfolio performance. Dashboards, schedules, budgets, milestones, risk reports, and other metrics can help us understand where things stand.

Those are important, and we should use them.

But I've also learned that progress shows up in ways that aren't always captured on a dashboard.

Sometimes it's someone thanking a project manager for the work they've done. Sometimes it's another department asking how your PMO operates because they're interested in adopting some of your practices. Sometimes it's project managers outside your PMO wanting to learn more about what your team is doing.

Those are signs that people are seeing value in the work.

And I think we need to recognize that.

Finally, I want to share something with my fellow PMO leaders.

Be in your role.

Make decisions. Establish guardrails. Give your people direction and support, and then let them lead.

Include your team in building and improving the PMO. Keep them informed about what's happening across the organization, what leadership is discussing, and how those decisions may affect their work.

Give them opportunities to contribute ideas, challenge existing practices, and take ownership of improvements. And look for ways to help them grow beyond managing individual projects.

We should be developing the next generation of project management leaders.

When I look back at my career, I'm grateful for the opportunities I've had to manage projects, build teams, develop standards, and work with some really good people.

And the longer I do this work, the more I come back to the same principles.

We don't need to make project management more complicated to make it more valuable. We need to invest in capable people, establish practical processes, and give them the leadership support to deliver meaningful results.

That's what People, Process, Progress is about.

Thanks for spending some time with me today.

Godspeed, y'all.