

H4 Consulting Brief

Planning for Results

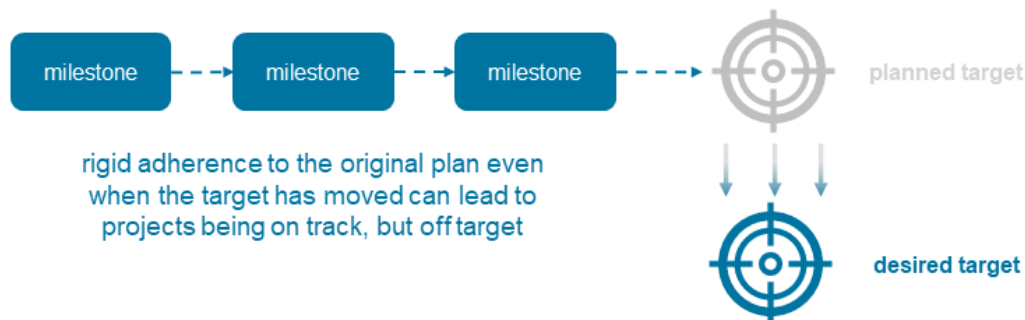
Many projects complete all, or most, of the activities they planned, yet fail in the end to achieve the desired results. Many hard-working, well-meaning people follow work plans faithfully, only to be disappointed by outcomes that do not live up to expectations. Just because a plan has been approved does not mean it is perfect and does not stop the world from changing around it. Rigid adherence to an agreed trajectory does not help to hit a moving target.

People who plan and manage projects tend to focus more on the work required at each step than on how they will know if the project is still heading towards the target. Projects are often set up and delivered by special teams that are separate from the people who will actually realise the benefits of the project, so it makes sense for the project team to focus on delivery.

In the early stages, the destination may be difficult to quantify into precise targets, so planning tends to emphasise actions in lieu of outcomes. Once work is underway, even the best plans still need to adjust to new developments and changed circumstances. Even if someone suspects that a plan will not deliver the desired results, it can seem safer to keep following an approved plan than to challenge it part way through.

Merely ticking off activities is not necessarily a good predictor of likely outcomes. Schedules of binary milestones are simple and easy to follow, but offer comparatively little insight into progress toward the intended result. Work may appear to be on track when measured by project activity alone, but this information is superficial and can be misleading for decision makers. Ticking off a list of activities is not the same thing as building a bridge to different results.

The illusion of momentum can also obscure deeply flawed assumptions. Projects that wait too long to validate the assumptions underpinning the original plan, or to test that early outcomes suggest positive results, may find that it is already too late to adapt in ways that could still achieve the desired outcome.



To really understand whether a project will deliver what it set out to achieve, project teams need to do more than just monitor whether planned actions have been taken. They need to test the effects of those actions. Enriching schedules with measurable targets for progressive indicators of success helps to gauge the success of the project, not just its completeness.

Using leading, as well as lagging, indicators help to bring forward opportunities to assess whether a project is likely to achieve its intended results, rather than waiting until it is too late to change course. Creative use of leading indicators can assess pace (e.g. how fast something is progressing), quality (e.g. how well something is working, or is received), assumptions (e.g. whether the logic underpinning the project is stacking up), and much more.

Combining traditional, binary milestones with targets that test the likelihood of achieving the ultimate goals can offer rich insight into the true status of a project. Early insight helps decision makers to shift their focus from whether a project is “on track” to whether it is likely to land “on target.” With a clear focus on the objectives of a project, and not just its execution, decision makers can more readily recognise issues and adjust their plans to achieve key objectives.

No plan is perfect, and the world keeps turning while projects are in progress. We need to go beyond simply tracking variance from a rigid schedule that was defined up front, to tracking a mix of milestones and other indicators. Projects that measure the distance to target, not just milestones completed, have the information they need to change trajectory in flight and hit a bullseye on a moving target.

To find out more about how you can use this approach in your organisation, contact us: info@h4consulting.com.au
Find additional resources at www.h4consulting.com.au/resources