

9

Managing the Strategic Action Cycle

*You have to be fast on your feet
or else a strategy is useless.*

—Lou Gerstner, IBM

Taking a “Cycle-Logical” Approach

In Chapter 1, I cited “one-shot planning” as one of the six dangerous planning mistakes. The chapter at hand offers thoughtful ways to overcome that mistake.

All living systems have the ability to learn from, and adapt to, their environment. Projects are living systems as well and the most useful project plans are “living documents” that evolve as unfolding internal or external circumstances force a shift in approach.

Keeping your plans timely and relevant is an excellent *proxy measure* of how well you are handling the project’s management process.

You do so by building feedback loops into your project plans and deliberately manage the *strategic action cycle*.

Taking an adaptive “cycle-logical” approach allows you to make intelligent responses to obstacles and opportunities that the project encounters *after* it starts and is under way.

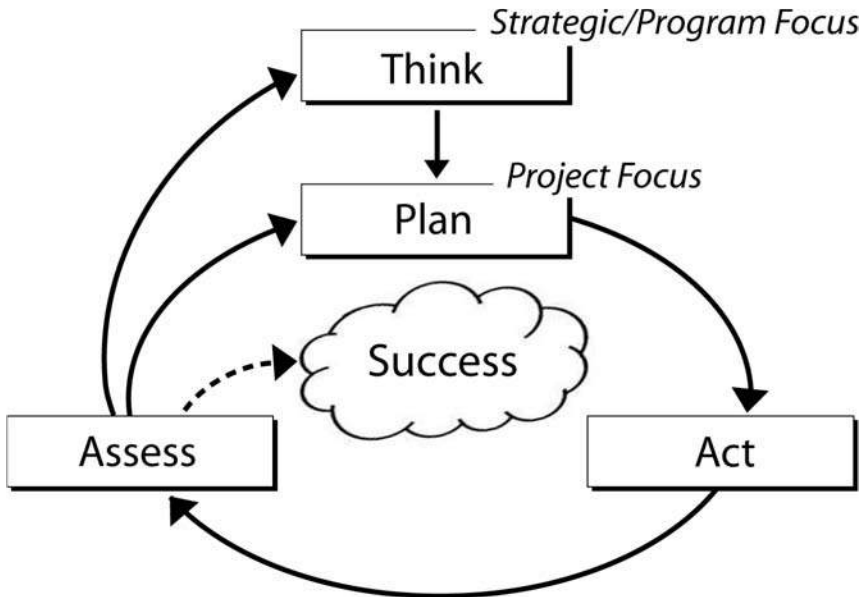


Figure 9.1 Strategic Action Cycle

This same philosophy is behind other management systems which include feedback loops (e.g., the Shewhart Cycle of Plan-Do-Check-Act).

Building any useful management model begins by considering the functions it needs to perform and then putting concepts together in a meaningful way. In our case, this model must integrate strategic/program planning with project management.

To derive an appropriate model, let's start with the concepts of Think-Plan-Act, the rallying cry of the Association for Strategic Planning.

We'll expand that model by adding *Assess* to get "Think—Plan—Act—Assess" (TPA²). Figure 9.1 shows the strategic action cycle in visual form.

The cycle begins with "Think," the big picture strategic/program focus which follows the process from Chapter 4, or an equivalent strategic planning process.

Results of strategic thinking identify projects to be managed with the Plan-Act-Assess cycle.

Project plans created with LogFrames provide a solid foundation for action (execution/implementation) and Assessment.

The Assess block can complete the loop in three ways. If assessment shows that success has been achieved—as defined by project Purpose—the project can be considered complete.

More frequently, Assessment results in project replanning and making fresh plans which stimulate and restimulate the cycle.

In more volatile environments or highly iterative projects, an Assessment may involve substantially rethinking the larger strategic approach. Such assessments mean “you have another think coming.”

The more volatile your environment, the more important to fine-tune your original hypothesis over time, improve your LogFrame plan and process, and document the evolution of design changes. With each cycle, each aspect of the LogFrame must be reconsidered—with special attention to which Assumptions remain valid and which new ones may emerge.

A well done LogFrame sets the stage for all three types of Assessment.

Three Types of Assessment

The Assessment step grounds your project in reality by looking at the environment and adjusting based on real-world feedback.

Consider how these three vital but different Assessment functions—Monitoring, Review, and Evaluation—should be part of your project.

Project *Monitoring* is an ongoing process of tracking budget and schedule against deliverables and making tactical adjustments. It presumes the Logical Framework is the best design and focuses team attention on translating Inputs into Outcomes.

Project *Review* is an occasional process that asks managers to step back from the day-to-day work and reassess their approach. It challenges the project design and invites changes in the LogFrame, with emphasis on the Outcome to Purpose link.

Project *Evaluation* examines impact and cost effectiveness. Project evaluations are often timed as the end of one phase nears and another is about to begin, or after the project is over. evaluation examines Purpose to Goal linkages.

Obviously, not everything about the project can or should be constantly assessed, unless you're in an exceptionally fluid situation.

In all three types, Assessment examines the casual linkages as well as critical Assumptions. Changes in the status of Assumptions always introduce issues to react and respond to.

Sharpening Information Needs

Assessment requires sifting through and making sense of information related to accomplishment of Measures at each level. In well thought-out LogFrames, the Verification column identifies where you'll get the necessary information concerning key Measures.

Project managers must consider how best to get the needed information throughout the project. Relevant information is the basis for real-time Monitoring and collects baseline information for the other two functions.

Communicating well starts by defining the nature of the information that project team members, executives, and other stakeholders will need. Consider these questions:

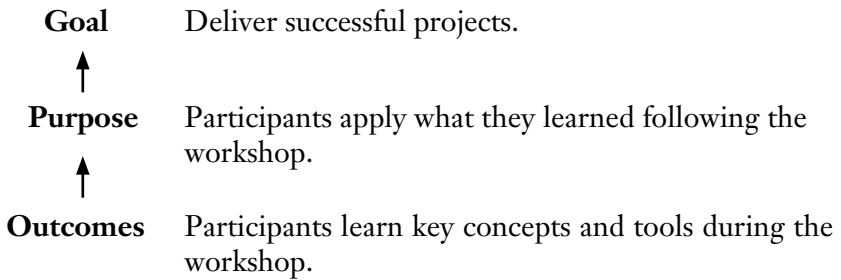
- Who needs to know what and why?
- What is “must-have” versus “nice-to-have” information? What is the benefit/cost of additional data?
- What information will automatically be provided by existing organizational systems, and what must be home-brewed (at a cost)?
- Who will be the responsible for collecting and processing what information?
- How will we set up an effective archiving and retrieval system?

Don't rely only on reports and other system-generated information to keep your finger on the project pulse. A reliable project MIS not only includes databases, computers, and formal status reports, but actively embraces the informal and human information processes.

Formal systems provide an incomplete picture because they miss the soft stuff. Keep in mind meaningful key process indicators, such as project team effectiveness, productivity of meetings, as well as levels of trust and open communications. A brief and candid hallway conversation often yields richer information than may be provided in formal project Briefings.

Type One Assessment: Project Monitoring

To illustrate the three levels of Assessment, let's call on our Workshop example from Chapter 3, as shown in the LogFrame on page 45 and summarized below:



Monitoring primarily examines progress in turning Inputs into Outcomes. The dynamics of most projects require multiple means of monitoring, which aim to put together a reasonable picture of what's happening by actively communicating with task managers, reading reports, juggling e-mail, touching base with key stakeholders and doing appropriate analysis. Earned Value Analysis (EVA) is a commonly used monitoring tool in larger projects to relate Input consumption with Outcome production.

Meaningful monitoring requires first establishing major milestones to measure against. If you were to drive from San Francisco's Golden Gate all the way to New York's Battery Park, you could search frantically for every milepost, telephone pole, and center-line dash along the way, which serve as evidence of forward motion toward your New York Goal. Or, you could accept Salt Lake City, St. Louis, Columbus, and Pittsburgh as reasonable milestones on your journey. Set your focus on significant milestones and be judicious in selecting those primary project checkpoints.

How frequently and fine-grain should you monitor?

The late project management expert Arnie Ruskin suggested the term "inch-pebbles" to track more closely than "milestones." If your project requires even more fine-grained tracking, consider using "centimeter sand grains."

What justifies being called a major milestone in LogFrame terms? By definition, Outcome completion is always one. The start

Schmidt's Law of Milestone Frequency

Schmidt's Law of Milestone Frequency provides some basic guidelines for how many to include in your own project. As a general rule of thumb, a one-month project might have one or two milestones per week. A six-month project usually needs somewhere around 12 to 15 milestone points, or one every two weeks or so. On longer duration projects, avoid going more than three weeks between milestones, or otherwise people may lose focus.

or completion of critical activities, Assumptions verification, and management process activities such as mid-project reviews may also constitute milestones. Choose what matters most.

In our Workshop example, monitoring progress toward our desired Outcome “Concepts Learned” is based on observation of individual learning activities during the workshop itself to see how well people seem to “get it.” Heads-up instructors continually make fine-tune adjustments to stay on target by changing their teaching approach, perhaps by offering more examples or asking for questions.

Trip-Wire Events as Milestone Reminder

Consider inserting early “trip-wire” points ahead of a milestone’s due date to provide an early status check and a gentle prod to action. This recognizes the natural human tendency to procrastinate.

I still recall with horror some dreaded college term papers that were assigned two months in advance, but I would wait until a few nights before due date to start working on it, maybe even pulling all-nighters to finish. The papers passed, but clearly weren’t my best work. My favorite college professor taught me a valuable project management lesson by requiring that we submit a thorough outline three weeks before the term paper due date. This forced an earlier start, which resulted in a better final product. Can you identify with “term-paper syndrome”? Would the trip-wire concept be useful in your projects to spot potential problems early?

Don't Ask This Question

We've all encountered people who don't deliver on time as promised. Reduce these nasty surprises by asking better questions ahead of time to get an accurate picture of where things stand. The most common (and worst) question project managers ask when determining status, is, "*How's it going on this task?*" Bad question. You are likely to get vague answers. Here are better quality questions that generate dialogue and encourage candor:

- Are you having any difficulties that would keep you from meeting targets?
- Are you getting the support you need from others?
- Is there anything else I should know about this?
- What do you need from me?

Type Two Assessment: Project Status Review

Sit in on most any project meetings and you'll hear discussion of issues, problems and actions, mostly at the Input to Outcome level. That's fine—but what's your mechanism for occasionally rethinking the whole project?

On occasion, rise above the day-to-day focus and ebb-and-flow of your project to review where things are, because Murphy's Law can strike at any time.

Project monitoring asks "Are we *on* track?"; project reviews ask "Are we on the *right* track?"

A well-done LogFrame provides an action plan as well as a baseline for subsequent review and improvement. Periodic project reviews should challenge the design in order to strengthen it; which can be a potent mid-stream tool for redirecting any project. Use the LogFrame to challenge your strategy by posing questions such as:

- Is our Purpose still valid? What's our progress toward Purpose?
- Is our Purpose likely to be achieved with this plan? Will this Purpose get us to the Goal?
- What is the status of Assumptions?

- Are these the right Outcomes? Are we producing them effectively?
- Should new Outcomes or Assumptions be added? Existing ones dropped?
- How should we revise our key strategic hypotheses (Outcome to Purpose to Goal) to produce better results?

Review sparks replanning. A shifting mix of Outcomes is to be expected and encouraged. Some Outcomes will be completed and others can be deleted while new ones may need to be added.

Project reviews are an ideal time to examine the current state of stakeholder involvement and support.

Changes in the status of a key Assumption can sabotage your project, as well as open new options. When the OSRP sealed-source project began, it had been thought impossible to bury radioactive waste in the Waste Isolation Pilot Project (WIPP), which was a suitable New Mexico site that had been designated only for military waste, not civilian waste. So the task force had started conducting detailed studies to characterize 15 other potential sites.

But the events of September 11, 2001 changed everything. At a post-9/11 project review, the project team sensed a change in the political environment that made it possible to overcome the bureaucratic obstacles to burying the waste in the WIPP. Suddenly, the originally planned Outcomes of completed site characterizations were not needed and could be dropped.

Market dynamics may be blowing the schooner of corporate progress across a lake of opportunity, but well-timed project reviews might reveal that you'll soon be off-course unless you steer lightly back toward your Goal.

Type Three Assessment: Project Evaluation

While common in international development, evaluation in the corporate world remains underused and underappreciated as a management function. When done well, it provides a high ROI and yields critical lessons learned that may benefit future projects.

Project evaluations (sometimes called “post-mortems”) occur after the project is complete. As noted earlier, project completion

and project success are two very different concepts. Your project may be finished when Outcomes have been delivered, but it is not really successful until Purpose has been reached. We built it, but did they come? Workshop participants learned concepts, but did they apply them?

Remember that evaluation is, in itself, a project that takes time and resources. Before committing to evaluation, make sure the intent is positive so that it's an exploration rather than an inquisition. Evaluations might examine questions like these:

- To what extent were Outcomes produced and Purpose achieved?
- What was the impact on Goal?
- What went right, and why? What went wrong, and why? Were we to do this over again, what would we do differently?
- What Assumptions may have been invalid?
- What did we learn that was worth learning?
- How can these insights be captured, shared and integrated organization-wide?
- How do we codify our learning and apply the lessons to future efforts (pamphlets, case studies, knowledge banks, web-pages, and so on)?

The LogFrame Approach to Project and Program Evaluation

The LogFrame was created with evaluation in mind. First, note that in a well-done LogFrame we have set up a basic evaluation framework with the Purpose and Goal level Measures and Verification. We can evaluate *project* success at the Purpose level; and *program* success at the Goal level. As we trace through the workshop example of Chapter 3, consider how you might apply a similar evaluation planning process to your own project. Recall the basic workshop LogFrame from that chapter on page 57.

Our workshop project could be evaluated at multiple LogFrame levels. The first level is the project Outcome level: Concepts learned. We would check extent of learning against our predefined Outcome Measures, using the shown means of Verification: in-class exercises and formal tests. In most projects, Outcome production is relatively easy to measure. If we can't, it's because we left them too vague (which was planning mistake number one).

But the real payoff occurs at Purpose and Goal. To determine “Concepts applied,” our first evaluation occurs six weeks after the workshop, with a second, more extensive evaluation six months later.

Our key Purpose Measure is that 60 percent of people begin applying the concepts within six weeks after the workshop. Unless there is prior experience to show this level is reasonable, this is an estimate. Remember, for open-ended, R&D, and process-type projects, QQT Measures are not stated targets to reach, but merely indicative of what might be possible.

Achieving 40 percent might be enough to justify the workshop. In fact, just one person applying these concepts might have a tremendous impact—if it were applied to the right project. But, on the other hand, let’s say that the actual result was a disappointing 10 percent. What went wrong?

The first place we look to determine causes of failure is *Assumptions*. Here we have two key ones:

1. *Participants have opportunity to apply concepts (nature of their job is suitable)*. Let’s say we found out that only half the participants had a project that was suitable for applying these concepts. Already our 60 percent target would be way too high; 30 percent might have been a more realistic maximum.
2. *Participants’ boss and/or organizational environment support and encourage use of the concepts*. This one examines the on-the-job fit and the degree of receptivity. Was there active support and encouragement? Or was there resistance because of the “Not Invented Here” syndrome?

The means of evaluating these key Assumptions might include surveying the boss as well. This inclusive step would give more clues as to how to adjust future projects of this type.

Let’s say that the evaluation results showed that there was not much boss encouragement, and the reason was lack of understanding and appreciation by the executives overseeing the project managers. This might identify the need for a “boss briefing,” or an advocacy document to inform them of the LogFrame value and benefits. (On our website, you’ll find a free special report written for this purpose.)

One could also conduct a Goal level evaluation of project results and the effectiveness of the project/program management

system. This would involve a much wider scope than just training workshops.

Evaluation Data and Methods

While designing projects using LogFrames, you simultaneously establish the basis for later evaluation.

The Fircrest School project, previously discussed (see the full LogFrame in the Appendix), provides an outstanding example of how this tool helps to identify data needed for evaluation at the time of project design. The Purpose Measures spelled out in advance the necessary data, while the Verification column showed how it should be gathered. Together, Measures and Verifications should identify what data you might need to collect on a regular basis from day one, or at least establish a baseline to work from.

Periodic evaluation can yield money-saving insights, but only if the relevant data exists. Your project team may not know exactly what data is needed or have collection mechanisms at the beginning of their project. In this case, explicitly create an Outcome devoted to learning what is required, so that evaluative data can, and will, be collected along the way. If some of the means identified in the Verification column do not currently exist, they may need to be created under an Outcome called “Verification Mechanisms Developed.”

Just Do It

After the project is complete, there will be all kinds of reasons not to evaluate (people are too weary, too drained, or are moving on to other things). Guard against this by building an evaluation milestone into the project plan, so clear expectations are there from the beginning. On occasion, you’ll encounter unplanned events that attach a cachet of negativity to the project. You reached your Goals, but just as everything was about to come to an unmitigated success, one of your delivery trucks ran over Narfy the Dog, casting a pall of angst over those in your organization who were fond of old Narfy. Step up and defuse these unfortunate finale-killers as quickly as possible.

Don’t treat setbacks or embarrassments as something beneath the capacity of your organization to deal with effectively. The accidents that happen along the way need smoothing over, so smooth whatever hiccup occurs in a quick, humane, and compassionate manner.

During the Tylenol scare, when saboteurs had laced on-the-shelf bottles with poison, Johnson & Johnson rapidly responded without attempting a cover-up. They were widely praised for reassuring the public, and their stock price rose because they handled it so well. This may well have been a milestone they didn't want to occur in their company history, but they turned it into a positive impression.

Celebrating Success

Take time to acknowledge on-time performance when your team does reach their milestone targets. Remember, you're working with fellow humans who could really appreciate an "Atta-girl" or "Atta-boy" for making their milestones on time. Sure, they're getting paid, but if you give public kudos and recognition when they hit the mark, they'll give their best to hit their other targets, too.

My philosophy is simple: Celebrate success early and often. Every worthwhile project has pushed people through frustration, disappointments, and setbacks. But with commitment and encouragement, good people rise to new heights of accomplishment. Along the way, simple recognition—like bringing a big box of bagels to project meetings—leaves a good taste behind. When the end arrives, recognize and reward participants. Team efforts should be heralded openly, publicly, and joyfully. Can you create a ceremony or ritual that signals and celebrates the end?

More elaborate rewards, such as promotions, study sabbaticals, vacations, cash bonuses, or awards presentations may also be appropriate at the project celebration. Make it worth the candle for all participants, but especially for anyone who might be perceived as "the little guy" so that your organization is seen as fair and just in rewarding effort, particularly on-target effort that benefits the whole organization. Make it special enough to be interesting. Invite some organization big shots, and team members' guests. Go beyond mere mechanics and make yours a *Project-Ender to Remember!*

LogFrame Limitations and Best Practices

For all its obvious benefits, the LogFrame is no cure-all or magic management solvent that dissolves each and every problem. Indeed,

if such a super-solvent could be invented, what material could be used to make a container to hold it?

No matter how clearly understood and skillfully applied, no approach can guarantee you will design foolproof programs or projects. While this tool is an organizing *frame for work*, you still have to *do the work to make it work*.

Molly Hageboeck is a LogFrame pioneer and evaluation expert who has conducted numerous evaluations, both as a consultant and as a USAID employee. Her research and that of others has identified common LogFrame usage errors and limitations that could affect the health of your project, such as:

- *Suffering from LogFrame tunnel vision*—Presuming that it provides a comprehensive view. At best, it’s a snapshot in time. The LogFrame is a valuable map, but the map is not the territory.
- *Confusing LogFrame Outcomes and Purpose*—Choosing Purpose Measures which are actually a restatement of Outcomes.
- *Jamming the Goal*—Bundling too many separate or linked Objectives into one level.
- *Doing the LogFrame in isolation*—Excluding key players whose role is important.
- *“Box filling”*—Adding context to fill each LogFrame cell without following the guidelines for best practice.
- *Playing “Gotcha”*—Using the LogFrame as a club to punish (as in “You missed this target—*Gotcha!*”)

Best Practice Tips

Prevention is the best medicine. Use the following best practice tips to prevent or cure these limiting ailments when they flare up or fester.

- *Treat the matrix as a summary*. Keep it clear and concise; supplement with other documents.
- *Make sure everyone on the team has working understanding* of the LogFrame (at a minimum, knowing the four questions).
- *Ensure that the right people are involved*. Invite key stakeholders to participate in project planning. (One team member can sketch out initial ideas, then shares them with the team to elaborate and collaborate.)

- *Stress the importance of the process of planning* as much as the plan that comes out of the planning process. Supplement liberally with other supporting tools.
- *Do not force detailed targeting* of Measures too early during the planning stages. Identify the indicators, but don't prematurely lock in to numbers.
- *Iterate to make it great.* Consider the first Logframe to be a rough draft that will require revision and reworking, perhaps through many cycles.
- *Build in specific milestones* on the calendar at which you refine and revise the matrix in the light of new information.
- *Monitor and manage changing Assumptions* over time.

When used properly, the benefits of using the LogFrame Approach as your planning foundation far outweigh any limitations. The multiple thinking perspectives blend the project ingredients into a strategic recipe so that it can bake at the right temperature for the right duration. Use it when the heat is on—without getting scorched.

Key Points Review

1. Be cycle-logical and manage successive iterations of the Think-Plan-Act-Assess learning cycle. To stay sufficiently nimble over time, build in evaluation and replanning events as milestones.
2. Monitoring, review and evaluation are linked assessment processes with very different functions. Monitoring asks, "Are we on track?" Review asks, "Are we on the *right* track?" And evaluation asks, "Did this track get us where we want to be?"
3. At the outset, break your effort into logical chunks and phases. Name each phase and create a LogFrame for each. Update your LogFrame each time you review or evaluate, with probable rechunking of the Outcomes.
4. Remember to acknowledge forward progress and celebrate small victories along the path to project success.