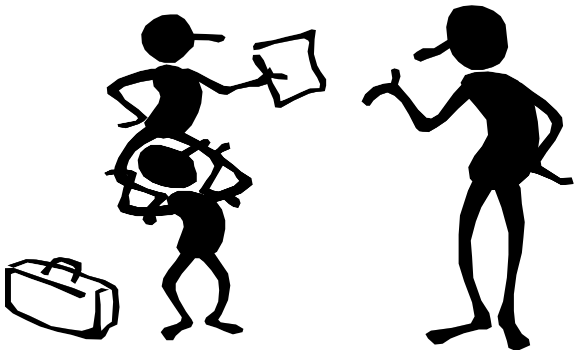

Meaningful Client Involvement:
Using the ECPM Framework Co-Manager Model

by

Robert K. Wysocki, PhD
President
EII Publications

Meaningful client involvement and the Co-Manager Model are unique to the ECPM Framework and the infrastructure upon which joint ownership of the deliverables is established and expected business value delivered. This is particularly important because many complex projects are often characterized as journeys into the unknown. A solution to a significant problem is not known. The complete solution must be discovered through iteration and must deliver the expected business value in order to be acceptable to the client. For the most complex of projects this can only happen in an open and creative team environment. That places a burden on the project team to embrace an infrastructure that supports and encourages meaningful client involvement and a challenge to senior management is to provide and support that infrastructure.

Remember that the client is often the best qualified Subject Matter Expert (SME) when it comes to an in depth understanding of the business process or product under consideration. While the client has a prominent role in the project team structure, there are some significant improvement opportunities that can result from incorporating the ECPM Framework Co-Manager Model into the project team structure. Maximizing client involvement in all aspects of the project will always be the best strategy.

THE BACKGROUND

Not too long ago, client involvement required nothing more than the client signing off on a lengthy and confusing functional specification loaded with unintelligible acronyms. This signing was more an implied threat of project delays than it was an agreement on the content. Fortunately, those days are history. Technology is more user-friendly, clients more technologically savvy, and satisfying their needs requires a participatory process. That's the good news.

The bad news is that client involvement doesn't come without challenges. As complexity increases and uncertainties surrounding solution discovery grow, meaningful client involvement becomes a major critical success factor (CSF). The project manager (PM) must be more attuned to the management processes they use and how those processes impact solution discovery and the subsequent generation of business value. The Co-Manager Model asks the traditional project manager to share authority with the client. That in itself is a cultural adjustment and often does not come easily. The client or their business analyst (BA) must be more attuned to how the product deliverables contribute to business value. Both parties must create an open and honest relationship in order to improve the likelihood of achieving project success and delivering acceptable business value. Synergy is found through those cooperative efforts, and without it, the likelihood of finding acceptable solutions is put at greater risk than is necessary.

Keep in mind that the client may be the best subject matter expert (SME) when solving unsolved problems and exploiting untapped business opportunities. Beyond their SME roles, they are the owners of the project deliverables. Their meaningful involvement produces a vested interest in the success of the project. In a sense, their reputation and credibility are at stake. Project success is measured first by the business value that the solution delivers and secondly by the successful execution of the process that created the solution.

I have long been an advocate of using the project characteristics and the internal organizational environment and external market competitive situation to drive the choice of project management model and its necessary adaptations to create a best-fit project management environment for a given project. That adaptation extends to the project team as well. In this article, I introduce a new complex project team model. It consists of co-managers — one from the process side and one from the product side. They work collaboratively and equally to share responsibility. I have used a co-manager team structure for over 20 years and wouldn't do otherwise. I harbor no expectations that this change will be easy, especially for those project managers who are used to a model where they are in charge. In my model, they must share that responsibility.

If I could choose and deliver on only one CSF for managing a complex project it would be meaningful client involvement. Beyond their SME roles, the experts are the owners of the project deliverables. Their meaningful involvement produces a vested interest in the success of the project. In a sense, their reputation and credibility are at stake. There is no better way to assure their contribution, commitment and participation than to fully involve them in the process of managing the project. That is the underlying strategy that drives the ECPM Co-Manager Model.

Please keep an open mind as we explore these variations of the management model. Remember, the delivery of acceptable business value is the success criterion that drives the project, and the ECPM Co-Manager Model is just another tool for generating that business value. I will always consider this Model as a work in progress as I continue to learn from successful client engagements.

A QUICK VIEW OF COMPLEXITY AND UNCERTAINTY

Complexity and uncertainty are two characteristics common to most contemporary projects. Furthermore they create a challenge to the success of even the most sophisticated management approaches. To be successful project management processes and practices must take full advantage of available tools, templates and processes designed for just such situations.

Increasing Complexity

All of the simple projects have been done. They left a rich heritage of recorded experiences for use in future simple projects. Remaining projects become more complex every passing day. Situations that have never been encountered are more the rule than the exception. As problems become complex, they also become more critical to the success of the enterprise. They must be solved. We don't have a choice. They must be managed, and we must have an effective way of managing them.

Increasing Uncertainty

With increasing levels of complexity comes increasing levels of uncertainty. The uncertainty relates to the organization's ability to find acceptable solutions. Adapting project management approaches to handle uncertainty means that the approaches must not only accommodate change, but also embrace it and become more effective as a result of it. Change will lead the team and the client to a state of certainty with respect to a viable solution to its complex problems. In other words, we must have project management approaches that expect change and benefit from it. Increasing levels of complexity and uncertainty means the project management approaches must allow for creativity, flexibility, and adaptability on the part of the complex project team. That is the new reality. The complex project team must be staffed with subject matter experts (SMEs) who have the deepest understanding of the project situation and can investigate possible solutions.

An intuitive way of graphically presenting complexity and uncertainty [1] is shown in Figure 1.1.

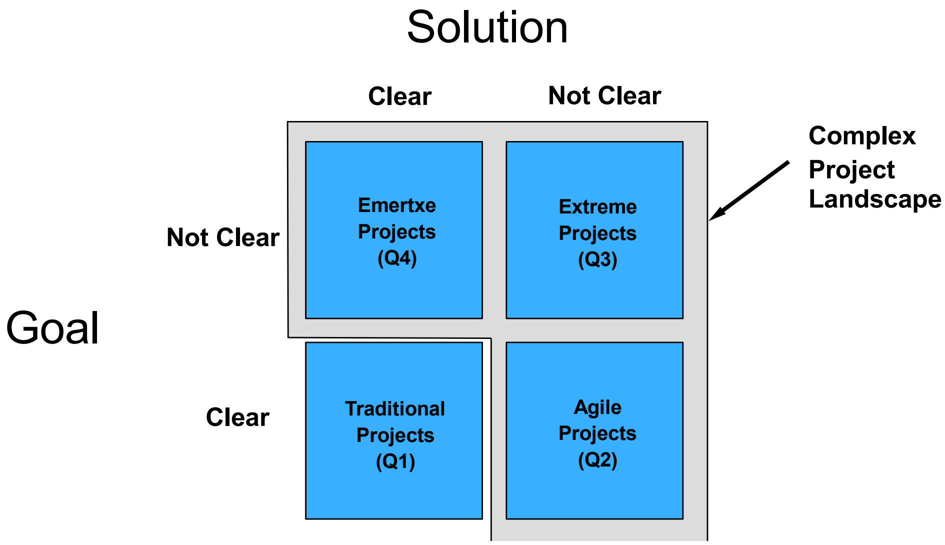

Figure 1.1 Traditional Projects versus Complex Project Landscape

Quadrant 1 (Q1) is familiar territory as it houses the traditional projects. All types of Waterfall and other linear and some incremental models are used for projects in Q1. Quadrants 2, 3 and 4 are the domain of the complex projects. While a simple taxonomy it facilitates the mapping of project types and requirements to the best fit project management model. In practice it has proven to be comprehensive in scope and inclusive of all known project management methodologies. As project execution continues the project management environment adapts to changing conditions. This approach is a unique feature of the ECPM Framework and has contributed to significant increases in project success and the delivery of sustainable business value.

THE COMPLEX PROJECT TEAM

One aspect of establishing meaningful client involvement begins at the team level. The collaborative efforts of a development team and a client team working in partnership creates a synergy. This collaboration begins within the management structure of the project team. We begin this discussion with the structure of a typical complex project team (see Figure 1.2).

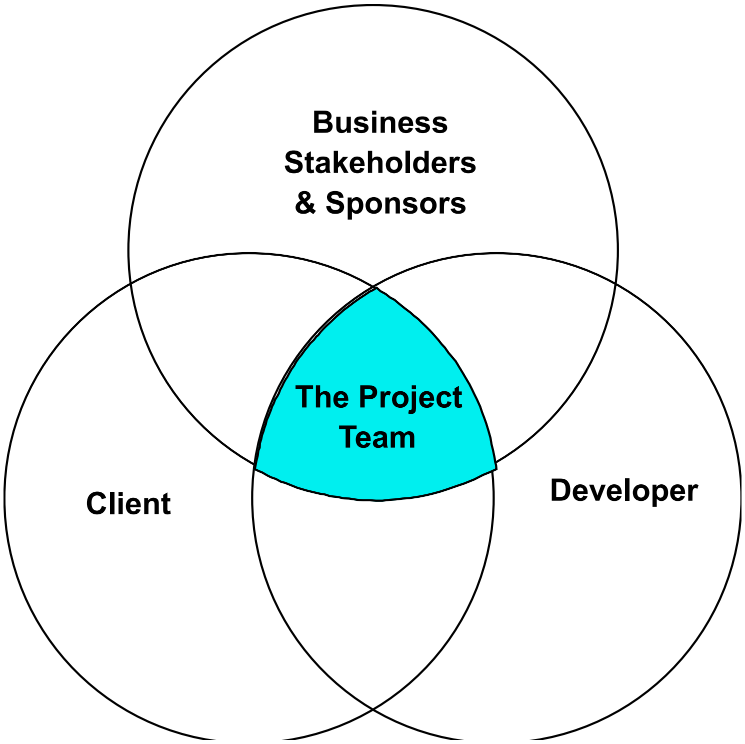

Figure 1.2 Complex Project Team Overview

The Complex Project Team is fully discussed below. For now it is sufficient to know that the Co-Manager Model is unique to the ECPM Framework and in it are features that are easily integrated into the project that will improve process performance.

THE IMPORTANCE OF MEANINGFUL CLIENT INVOLVEMENT

The complex project landscape is populated with unsolved problems and business opportunities not yet exploited. None of these are easy projects. Some have been worked on before with less-than-satisfactory outcomes or no usable outcomes at all. If these projects are critical to the business, they must be successfully executed and produce the sustainable results for which they were undertaken. So the best approach for an enterprise is to utilize a complex project management approach that brings the appropriate parties together into a true team environment and turns them loose to find the sought-after solutions. The team must be self-sufficient. It isn't sufficient to just put them together in the same room and hope for an acceptable business solution. There must be guidelines, tools, templates, and processes from which they craft a “recipe” to manage such challenging projects. That is a role for the complex project co-managers supported by an effective complex project management framework.

In its 2013 CHAOS report, the Standish Group cited lack of client involvement as the second most critical factor for project failure.[2] In fact, without meaningful client involvement from the start of a complex project, failure is certain. It's not just important to involve clients — that involvement must be meaningful. Simply getting a sign-off on an implementation, some arcane specification, or confusing test plan is not meaningful involvement. For over 20 years I have utilized a simple homegrown practice in my consulting practice that fosters an ownership position and encourages the client to do whatever they can to make the project successful. Remember that an ownership position puts reputations on the line to deliver business value just as the project manager's reputation is on the line to create and manage an effective process. Meaningful client involvement is an acquired practice and is purposely designed into the entire complex project lifespan.

Meaningful client involvement begins before the complex project has even been formulated. It begins at the point where the enterprise defines the desired end state and extends through to implementation planning and execution. In other words, meaningful client involvement is an effort that extends across the entire complex project from conception to birth to maturation. To get the continuing full benefit from these projects, the enterprise must commit to this effort. For most organizations it will be a complete evolution of how they approach the management of their projects, programs, and portfolios. It is one of the enabling factors for the strategic plan of the enterprise.

THE CHALLENGES OF CULTIVATING MEANINGFUL CLIENT INVOLVEMENT

Early in my career as a project manager I invited my client to work with me on a particularly complex software development project that my team was ready to start for them. The solution we sought had been elusive for a number of years and had reached the stage where it affected the business. The need was now critical, and something had to be done. Despite our best efforts, the risk was high that we would fall short of meeting the sponsor's objectives and their expected business value. We knew that we may not be able to create the best solution, but as a minimum, it had to be an acceptable solution. Later solutions could improve the original solution. We faced a particularly high-risk assignment due to the complexity of the business processes involved. If I was going to be successful, I knew I would need the participation of the client far beyond the common practice of the time. So I extended an invitation to the client to get meaningfully involved with the development team. I didn't know what reaction I would get.

The client's first reaction was that they didn't know anything about software development and didn't understand how they could help. They balked at my invitation, and it took some reassurance from me that I would need their expertise if we were to be successful. Fortunately, I built a trusting relationship with them from previous project successes and at least I convinced them to participate. It was clear that I was in a "show me" situation.

What If You Can't Get the Client Meaningfully Involved?

This is a tough situation to face and history is not on our side. Not having meaningful client involvement in a complex project is a show-stopper. In my earlier days, I might have said I would find some work around and do the project without the meaningful involvement of the client. Now with several years' experience to draw on I just wouldn't do the project until the client was willing to be meaningfully involved. I've tried both the workaround and the delay strategies and had a few successes but left a lot of blood on the trail. I often won the battle but lost the war. In general neither strategy met with my satisfaction. Now I tend to follow a more diplomatic route. The success of the project is critical to the continued operation of the business and is beyond your authority to cancel or postpone. On the assumption that the project will go ahead what would you, could you, or should you do? Of prime importance is finding out what barriers to meaningful involvement exist in the mind of the client and put a mitigation program in place. Two barriers come to mind, but there could be others.

What If the Client Was Burned by Prior Project Experiences and Is Hesitant to Get Involved?

If this is the problem, the technical professionals have inherited some significant baggage from their grandfathers. In those days, the customer wasn't really encouraged to get involved. Just get the requirements document written and approved and turn the project over to the development and delivery teams. The prevailing attitude was that the client would only slow the process down. Fortunately, that attitude hasn't survived but the memory of it has. The client is much more comfortable minding their own business and leaving technology to the technical folks. The client gets involved but only when the development and delivery team offers them a comfortable way to get involved.

The burden is on the project team to change this attitude. Depending on the particular circumstances that the client faces, different initiatives on the part of the project team can be employed. Workshops, seminars, site visits, conferences, and other venues are productive. One strategy that I have had excellent results with is to engage the client in concurrent workshops and seminars that are imbedded in their complex project and to use actual project team exercises based on the project. This is an effective twist on the “learn by doing” principle that underlies all successful complex projects.

What If the Client Wants to Get Too Involved?

Yes, I have encountered this situation too — but not very often. Taking a cue from the days of end-user computing, there will be clients who aggressively promote their solution. They want to get too involved. They push hard to get their own solution on the table and are reluctant to consider other ideas. You don’t want to discourage them from sharing their ideas, but you don’t want to risk missing a better solution. They can be an effective team player and the best SME you might have, but their eagerness must be channeled.

I have borrowed process ideas from prototyping and brainstorming as appropriate. For example, you might start solution design with their solution and discuss ways it might be improved with other features and functions. Often, the client will not be aware of other systems and processes that can be used to their advantage. Both prototyping and brainstorming can be used here to include these systems and processes in the client’s solution with good results. Assuming the client offers good suggestions, exploit this with discussions about more sophisticated solutions that cause them to generate even greater business value than their solution affords. Capitalize on the knowledge that the client displays through their input.

Clients come in all sizes and descriptions. Some are a veritable fountains that spew ideas and changes. This may seem like an enviable situation, but don’t overlook the need for convergence to a solution. Their behavior can cause the team to spend too much time on non-value-added work as they do their analysis of the scope implications and contribution to business value.

Others don’t seem to have any ideas to share or maybe the project manager hasn’t created the open and honest team environment that is needed. This is a dangerous situation and calls upon all of the skills of the project manager and the development team. Change is critical in every complex project. Here is the list. It is explored in the forthcoming book (see **NOTE** at the end of the article):.

- Always Use the Language of the Client
- Maintain a Continuous Brainstorming Culture
- Use a Co-Project Manager Model
- Establish an Open and Honest Team Environment

ESTABLISHING AND SUSTAINING MEANINGFUL CLIENT INVOLVEMENT IN THE PROJECT

The complex project is a high risk project. The Client is the best SME for an overall mitigation plan to manage and contain that risk. Integrating agile practices such as the ECPM Framework benefits the organization in a number of ways:

- Improved scope planning and requirements management at Client Checkpoints
- Early realization of business value through Incremental product/service delivery
- Leverage client product/service expertise and create client ownership of deliverables
- Efficiently support iterative solution discovery and maintain a lean process

The lessons I learned from the projects discussed in this report are clear. No one can claim a corner on the knowledge market (i.e., more than one SME may be needed), and the client and every team member must be given a chance to contribute openly in a brainstorming fashion to the solution. Creativity is a critical component and must be openly encouraged and practiced. The development team and the client team can form a formidable team, if given the chance, and exploit the synergy that results. Ownership of the resulting solution can only come from giving all of the stakeholders an equal opportunity to meaningfully participate in the development of the solution. I also learned that through ownership of the solution, comes ownership of the implementation. Since it was their solution, they wouldn't let it fail. The Client took the lead. How often can you claim that?

Implementing these practices takes project manager leadership and courage. For some clients, that requires selling the idea because they were the ones who responded to my request saying they were not technical and couldn't contribute to a technical project. My selling proposition is that even though they may not be technical, I am not an expert in their line of business or business function. So by combining our separate expertise, we can produce an effective solution and create the expected business value that justified approving the project in the first place. They bring the business knowledge and experience to the table, and my team brings the technical knowledge and experience. Together, we create the synergy needed to find creative solutions in the midst of a complex project world.

THE COMPLEX PROJECT TEAM

One aspect of establishing meaningful client involvement begins at the team level. The collaborative efforts of a development team and a client team working in partnership creates synergy. This collaboration begins within the management structure of the project team (see Figure 1.3).

A more detailed view of the complex project team is shown in Figure 1.4. This view reflects the team structure described in the ECPM Framework documentation. The most notable feature is the level of collaboration that exists among the complex project team. It begins at the project manager level. The typical project manager is named “Process Manager.” The other member of the co-manager team is called the “Product Manager.” As a team they share equally in all decision making and have equal authority over all project activities.

Figure 1.4 should be considered the full view of the complex project team. It identifies the roles that must be present in the complex project team for a project to be successful and deliver the expected business value. Roles may be combined. For example, the Business Systems Engineer and Development Team Leader roles might be combined into a single position. Implied in this team hierarchy are several positions from a project manager position family. That lends itself to a variety of career and professional development assignment to move an individual through the levels of the project manager position family as a result of their participation on complex project teams.

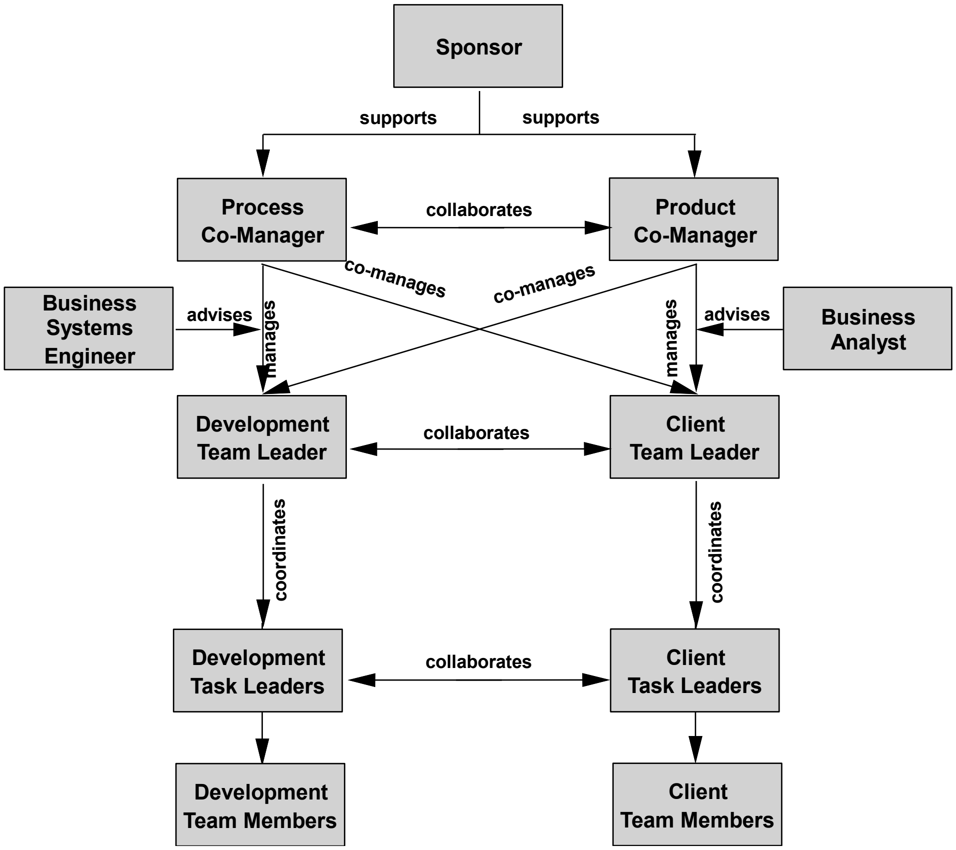

Figure 1.4 The Complex Project Team

First, observe that a complex project team bears little resemblance to a traditional project team. The traditional project team consists of the development team members and a single project manager. Such a team will not serve the management needs of a complex project.

Second, there are two PMs for every complex project. The co-managers have separate areas of responsibility but share equally in decision making. One co-manager is responsible for the tools, templates, and processes used for the management of the project. This is similar to the traditional project manager. The other co-manager is responsible for the deliverables that the project will produce. The deliverables could be a new or improved product or a new or improved service. For those who are Scrum aficionados this co-manager is quite similar to the product owner.

The important characteristic to note in Figure 1.4 is the degree to which the members are interlinked. It is very much like a nonhierarchical structure. An open and honest working relationship among all of the members is essential. The problem being solved or the business opportunity being exploited is complex, and an acceptable solution is not guaranteed. The more complex the project, the higher the risk of failure. Any barriers to success are unacceptable, and that includes the project team organization. So this team structure is very supportive of the interactive nature required for the successful execution of a complex project.

The business systems engineer and the business analyst are consultants to the team. Both of them are familiar with the parts of the business that affect or are affected by the project deliverables. One of the variations promotes both of these consultants to respective co-manager roles. These situations are rare but appropriate for the most complex and uncertain of projects.

The development team needs no further explanation at this point, but the client team can be more complex than you might first envision. The client team can consist of those in a single business unit, and the activities of those teams is quite straightforward. Where multiple business units are involved in the same project, the situation can become far more complex. The complexity begins at the requirements-elicitation phase and continues to the end of the development efforts. Competing and contradictory requirements often arise. In extreme cases, multiple interfaces or user views can resolve contradictory requirements. It takes a village to successfully deliver a complex project. Whenever I refer to "the complex project team," it is the team shown in Figure 1.4 that I'm referencing.

The co-manager model is the most effective management model for achieving and sustaining meaningful client involvement. I've used a co-project manager model since 1991 and will not take on a complex project without using this model or one of the variations discussed in this report.

Use a Co-Manager Model

The first and perhaps most important advice I offer is to adopt a practice, where the complex project is co-managed by you and a client representative with decision-making authority. That includes the design and implementation of the complex project methodology and all the projects that utilize the methodology. For that to succeed, the co-manager should be the highest level executive recruitable from the client-side of the enterprise. That person must be capable and willing to meaningfully himself or herself. Token representation is not going to work. Unfortunately, the higher you go in the enterprise, the greater the risk that you will end up with token representation. That would be the death of a complex project. Treat each case as unique and proceed accordingly. You need someone who can provide ideas and visible support. This co-project manager model is a founding principle of my consulting practice. I use it in every project my company undertakes. One manager is myself or one of my consulting partners, and the other is a high-level manager from the client-side. LOB managers, functional managers, and resource managers are often good choices as well. Both managers are equally involved and authorized to make all decisions and share in the success and failure that flow from their decisions. If you put your reputation on the line in a project, wouldn't you participate in the project to protect your reputation and your business interests? You bet you would.

So the project is technical and the client is not, and they want to know why you want them as your co-manager. That's easy. Before the project was a technical project, it was a business project, and it needs a business person as a major partner and decision maker. The project team should not be forced to make business decisions. As the technical project manager, you want every decision to be the best business decision possible, and your client is in the best position to make that happen. My client would hear me say that I wanted to do the very best job that I could, and it would not happen without their meaningful involvement as my co-manager on their project. I want my client co-manager to participate in all decisions. They provide the product and business expertise, while I provide the process and technical expertise. We do this as co-equals!

Keep the client in the best possible position to make those business decisions in a timely way. Given the need for a business decision, the project team can often present alternatives, maybe rank them, and even offer costs and benefits. Give the client whatever information you can to help them decide. Then step back and let them decide based on whatever business criteria they wish to use.

In the complex project world, holistic decisions — those that balance task feasibility and business value — are even more important and critical. In these projects, either the goal or solution or both cannot be clearly defined at the beginning of the project. The search for an acceptable business outcome drives the project forward. Again, the client is in the best position to choose the alternative directions that lead to the deliverables that produce acceptable business value. Present the feasible technical alternatives to the client and let them choose the best alternative. These iterations are repeated until there is convergence on a goal and solution that achieves the expected business value, or the client terminates the project because it isn't heading in a fruitful direction. The remaining time, money, and resources can be redirected to a more likely goal and solution. This strategy speaks of a team/client partnership. Without it, success is unlikely.

ESTABLISHING MEANINGFUL CLIENT INVOLVEMENT IN A PROJECT

The complex project is a high risk project. The Client is the best SME for an overall mitigation plan to manage and contain that risk. Integrating agile practices such as the ECPM Framework benefits the project in a number of ways:

- Improved scope planning and requirements management at Client Checkpoints
- Early realization of business value through Incremental product/service delivery
- Leverage client product/service expertise and create client ownership of deliverables
- Efficiently support iterative solution discovery and maintain a lean process

The lessons I learned from the projects discussed in this report are clear. No one can claim a corner on the knowledge market (i.e., more than one SME may be needed), and the client and every team member must be given a chance to contribute openly in a brainstorming fashion to the solution. Creativity is a critical component and must be openly encouraged and practiced. The development team and the client team can form a formidable team, if given the chance, and exploit the synergy that results. Ownership of the resulting solution can only come from giving all of the stakeholders an equal opportunity to meaningfully participate in the development of the solution. I also learned that through ownership of the solution, comes ownership of the implementation. Since it was their solution, they wouldn't let it fail. The Client took the lead. How often can you claim that?

Implementing these practices takes project manager leadership and courage. For some clients, that requires selling the idea because they were the ones who responded to my request saying they were not technical and couldn't contribute to a technical project. My selling proposition is that even though they may not be technical, I am not an expert in their line of business or business function. So by combining our separate expertise, we can produce an effective solution and create the expected business value that justified approving the project in the first place. They bring the business knowledge and experience to the table, and my team brings the technical knowledge and experience. Together, we create the synergy needed to find creative solutions in the midst of a complex project world.

PUTTING IT ALL TOGETHER

The complex project is a high risk project. The Client is the best SME for an overall mitigation plan to manage and contain that risk. Integrating agile practices such as the ECPM Framework benefits the project and the organization in a number of ways:

- Improved scope planning and requirements management at Client Checkpoints
- Early realization of business value through Incremental product/service delivery
- Leverage client product/service expertise and create client ownership of deliverables
- Efficiently support iterative solution discovery and maintain a lean process

The lessons I learned from the projects discussed in this report are clear. No one can claim a corner on the knowledge market (i.e., more than one SME may be needed), and the client and every team member must be given a chance to contribute openly in a brainstorming fashion to the solution. Creativity is a critical component and must be openly encouraged and practiced. The development team and the client team can form a formidable team, if given the chance, and exploit the synergy that results. Ownership of the resulting solution can only come from giving all of the stakeholders an equal opportunity to meaningfully participate in the development of the solution. I also learned that through ownership of the solution, comes ownership of the implementation. Since it was their solution, they wouldn't let it fail. The Client took the lead. How often can you claim that?

Implementing these practices takes project manager leadership and courage. For some clients, that requires selling the idea because they were the ones who responded to my request saying they were not technical and couldn't contribute to a technical project. My selling proposition is that even though they may not be technical, I am not an expert in their line of business or business function. So by combining our separate expertise, we can produce an effective solution and create the expected business value that justified approving the project in the first place. They bring the business knowledge and experience to the table, and my team brings the technical knowledge and experience. Together, we create the synergy needed to find creative solutions in the midst of a complex project world.

NOTE

A more complete version of this article will be published in a forthcoming book:

> ***Combining the Best of PRINCE2 and Agile: Using Selected Artifacts from the ECPM Framework***
> (Wysocki, Robert K. and Colin Bentley, J. Ross Publishing, forthcoming summer 2016).

That book will be available through this website.

REFERENCES & FURTHER READINGS

1. Wysocki, Robert K. *Effective Complex Project Management: An Adaptive Agile Framework for Delivering Business Value.* J. Ross Publishing (forthcoming 2014).

2. The Standish Group. “Chaos Manifesto 2013.”

3. IBM. “Capitalizing on Complexity: Insights from the Global Chief Executive Officer Study.” 2010.

4. Figure adapted from Hass, Kathleen, and Lori Lindbergh,(“The Bottom Line on Project Complexity: Applying a New Complexity Model, *Proceedings of PMI Global Congress 2010 Proceedings*, Washington, DC.) and used with permission.

5. Wysocki, Robert K. *Executive’s Guide to Project Management: Organizational Processes and Practices for Supporting Complex Projects*. Wiley, 2011.

6. Wysocki, Robert K. *The Business Analyst/Project Manager: A New Partnership for Managing Complexity and Uncertainty*. Wiley, 2011.

