A New Brainstorming Model for Client Involvement

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Every Project is a response to a Project Mandate. The Mandate can arise from anywhere in the organization but is usually the result of a senior manager or sponsor bringing an unsolved problem or untapped business opportunity to the attention of the organization. Underlying that mandate is the expectation, or even the insistence, that something be done. In response to that request, a team is commissioned to identify and prioritize a number of responses to that mandate. That can be of minor difficulty or a major STEP into the unknown and everything in between.

The ECPM Framework includes a comprehensive Brainstorming Process that handles the unique requirements for Project IDEATION. Project IDEATION begins with a short description of an unsolved business problem or untapped business opportunity and ends with a one page statement called the Project Overview Statement (POS) that will be proposed. To reach that proposed project a comprehensive brainstorming process has been designed for the ECPM Framework. That process takes the project team through the identification of ideas (the Divergent Phase) to the definition of affinity groups (the Emergent Phase) to a list of prioritized projects (the Convergent Phase) and finally to the one page statement of the project (the POS).

The major benefit of using the ECPM Brainstorming Process is that it is designed to foster early engagement by the Client. See Article 16.01 for more details on establishing meaningful and sustainable client involvement. An unsolved problem or untapped business opportunity (the Project Mandate) starts the Project IDEATION Phase of the ECPM Framework using the language of the Client. The Brainstorming Process concludes with a prioritized list of projects that address the problem or opportunity. Business Cases accompany each prioritized project and are often used as the criteria for prioritizing the final choices of potential projects. The IDEATION Phase concludes with the creation of the POS of the ECPM Framework.

ECPM FRAMEWORK BRAINSTORMING PROCESS

The IDEATION Phase of the ECPM Framework is usually not part of the linear project life cycle as commonly understood. In fact, PMI has little to say about the Business Case and the elicitation of requirements in preparation for gaining project approval (PMI, 2013). More common practice is to begin the project life cycle with some form of project charter statement. The project has already been decided all that remains is its formal definition and planning. The ECPM Framework takes a more holistic approach. Including IDEATION in the ECPM project life

cycle provides an understanding of how the project aligns with the business of the organization and its priority with respect to the generation of that business value. You will come to realize that it is a powerful tool for complex project management decision making that is shared only by PRINCE2 and the ECPM Framework. This uniqueness gives the ECPM Framework a powerful and far more effective capacity for successfully managing any type of project from inception to the end of the useful life of its deliverables. It is also a good segue into complex project portfolio management.

An ECPM project begins with a need to solve a critical yet unsolved problem, or to take advantage of an untapped business opportunity, but it can also begin with nothing more than knowledge that there is a problem or untapped business opportunity. Figure 1 highlights the three STEPs that are executed during the IDEATION Phase of a complex project. The approach discussed below is simple and intuitive. Once an idea is submitted: 1) a business case is developed; 2) high-level requirements are elicited; and, 3) a POS is prepared.
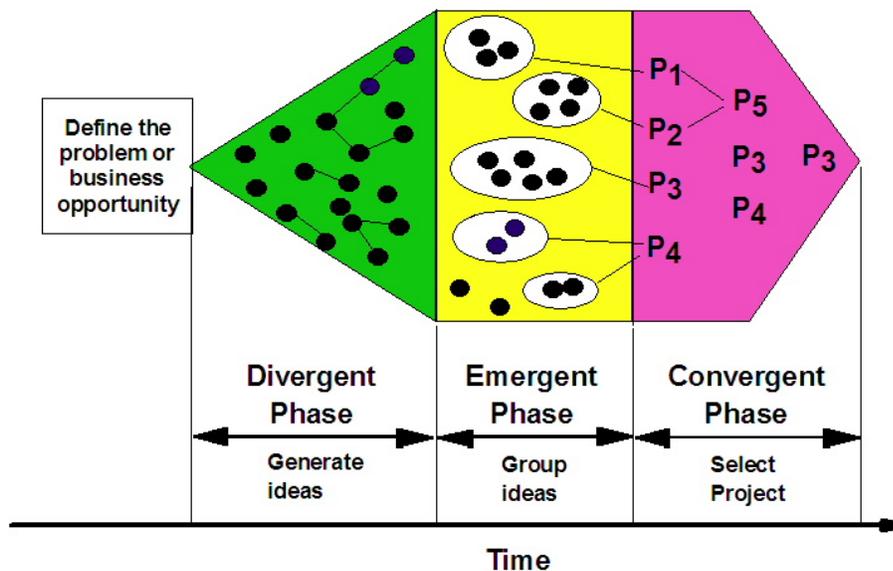

Figure 1: ECPM Framework IDEATION Phase STEP 1

Few project management books discuss the decision processes and practices over the entire project life span. A complex project is a dynamic entity that changes for all sorts of reasons, both predictable and unpredictable, and for that reason the best management approach will also be dynamic and change along with the changing project conditions that arise. This places several challenges on the sponsor, the project manager, the client manager, the client team, and the development team. They must be constantly vigilant and ready to embrace change. The purpose of these changes is to maintain alignment between the changing nature of the project and how it is managed. The IDEATION Phase provides that checkpoint during the project EXECUTION Phase. The goal of the ECPM Framework is to deliver maximum business value with respect to the strategic plan of the organization.

Project IDEATION Phase STEP 1: Develop the ECPM Business Case

Most project management methodologies start with the project as given, and proceed from there. Those methodologies often start with writing the POS or an equivalent short statement of the project. The ECPM Framework is not like other project management methodologies. The

ECPM Framework is a holistic framework and embraces the entire project life span. That begins with the very roots of a possible project—with an idea where a problem or an unmet need is identified and analyzed for business feasibility. STEP 1 ends with the identification of a specific project as described in the POS.

What Is an ECPM Business Case?
A business case is a document that identifies an unmet need, and provides evidence and justification for initiating or continuing a project investment to address that need. An ECPM business case typically includes:

> ➢ A statement of a critical need and the overall justification for a project to address that need
> ➢ A description of the product, process, or service that the project will deliver
> ➢ How the project aligns with the business strategy
> ➢ A financial analysis comparing alternative project ideas
> ➢ A prioritization of the alternatives and the preferred option
> ➢ The scope of the project and its deliverables
> ➢ The incremental business value that will result.

There are several models and processes that could be used to develop the business case. I have adapted the model developed by (Maul, 2011) to accommodate the range of projects in the ECPM Framework.

The ECPM Framework Brainstorming Process
Figure 1 includes the brainstorming process that drives the development of the Business Case beginning with a Project Mandate that is a call to action to solve a critical problem or exploit an untapped opportunity. The typical brainstorming process and mapped it across the IDEATION Phase. Figure 1 is the ECPM Framework adaptation of a Game Design Model originally developed by (Gray et al, 2010).

The ECPM Brainstorming Model consists of four parts:

> ➢ Definition of the problem or business opportunity
> ➢ Divergent Phase
> ➢ Emergent Phase
> ➢ Convergent Phase

Definition of the problem or business opportunity
ECPM is designed so that an idea can originate anywhere and be submitted by anyone in the organization. The person proposing the idea must get the endorsement and support of a manager, who will often become the sponsor. This is the first STEP in the process of developing a business case. A sponsor (usually an executive from the client organization who will fund the project) makes a request of senior management to undertake a project to solve a mission critical problem, or take advantage of a significant yet untapped business opportunity. Whether it be a problem or an opportunity, the organization is presented with a major challenge. The challenge arises from the fact that the problem has remained unsolved despite any prior attempts at resolution and it is unclear how to take advantage of the untapped business opportunity. That uncertainty is a fundamental characteristic of complex projects.

A representative from the development organization is assigned to work with the client sponsor. In keeping with the principles underlying the ECPM Framework, this individual from the

development organization will become one of the co-project managers, and someone from the sponsor's business unit (the client) will become the other co-project manager (Wysocki, 2014b). That could be the sponsor or a responsible business analyst, but it usually is a line manager from the affected business unit(s). Whoever is chosen, they must represent the sponsor's interests and have decision making authority for the business unit(s) they represent. These co-managers are equally responsible for the project from inception through completion (i.e., the project life span).

Divergent Phase

The purpose of the Divergent Phase is to elicit as many ideas as the brainstorming group can produce. No evaluation is done at the time, except for clarification. The more ideas that can be generated, the better the final result. No idea is too extreme to be rejected. One idea might not be used, but it may be the catalyst for other ideas. The best way to start the Divergent Phase is with a brainstorming session. What is presented here is a variant of the familiar brainstorming session that most people will be familiar with. This variant is far broader and comprehensive than you may have experienced so far:

BRAINSTORMING GROUP OPERATING RULE:

When a group member puts an idea on the table for consideration, they surrender ownership of the idea. It becomes the property of the entire group. It no longer makes any difference where the idea came from, and that should not even be part of any later discussions regarding the idea.

> ➢ Assemble any individuals, whether they are team members, consultants, or others, who may have some knowledge of the problem or business opportunity area. A team of 8-12 should be sufficient. They don't need to be experts. In fact, it may be better if they are not experts. You need people to think creatively and outside of the box. They may not be aware of any risks associated with their ideas, and that is good at this early stage. Experts tend to think inside the box and focus on why something can't be done, rather than on why it should be done. How it will be done is a decision better left to the SET-UP and EXECUTION Phases.

> ➢ The session begins with everyone recording an idea, reading it to the brainstorming group, and placing it on the table face up so everyone can see it. No discussion (except clarification) is permitted. Silence and pauses are fine. This allows any group member to think about the suggestions that have been submitted, and what they have heard and seen, and maybe that will spur another idea. Families of ideas can be generated like those shown linked together in Figure 2.1.

> ➢ After all the ideas are on the table, and no new ideas seem to be forthcoming from the brainstorming group, the Divergent Phase is declared closed by the facilitator. A Divergent Phase can be completed in less than two hours.

Emergent Phase

The purpose of the Emergent Phase is to collect and consolidate the brainstormed ideas into

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packages of similar ideas (i.e., affinity packages) as a prelude to defining specific action items:

➢ Discuss the ideas that have been submitted. Try to combine ideas, or revise ideas based on each member's perspective. Ideas are grouped into affinity groups, or packages of similar ideas, if you prefer. Some ideas may not be similar enough to be placed in a package. Don't discard any ideas. They might have value that has not yet been recognized.

➢ In time, primitive solutions will begin to emerge from these packages. Don't rush this process, and by all means test each idea with an open mind. Remember that you are looking for a solution that no individual could identify, but that you hope the group is able to identify through their collective efforts. There is a synergy that comes from a well-run Emergent Phase.

➢ An Emergent Phase can be completed in 2-3 hours, but don't cut it short if it is still producing good affinity packages.

Convergent Phase
The purpose of the Convergent Phase is to use the affinity groups or packages as the foundation for projects, and perhaps group similar packages into projects, and then to analyze, prioritize, and finally select the project to be proposed. Referring to Figure 2.1, the Convergent Phase consists of these activities:

➢ Define the ECPM project or projects (P1 through P4).
➢ Analyze (P1 and P2 become P5) and prioritize alternatives (P5, P3, P4).
➢ Select the first project to be proposed (P3).

The Convergent Phase is the first time that projects begin to take shape. Even though a single project is chosen, the list still can have residual value if the chosen project does not appear to be delivering business value. You may want to come back to this list for another pick.

Define the ECPM Project or Projects
Whether you use the ECPM Brainstorming Process or some type of Feasibility Study approach you should have generated a few alternatives, and it is time to explore them in more depth in your search for the best alternative. There are several variables that you might use to profile each alternative project. Here are some suggestions:

➢ Risk
➢ Duration
➢ Cost
➢ Team size and skills
➢ Expected business value

Analyze the Alternative Projects
The analysis of alternative projects examines their business value. The objective is to prioritize them and select the best. There are several approaches to analyzing the financial aspects of a project. While the sponsor should perform this analysis, it is often done by a project manager. The approaches I have chosen are easily understood and give enough insight into the financials of the project at this early stage in its life span.

Some organizations require a preliminary financial analysis of the project before granting approval to perform the detailed planning. Although such analyses are very rough because not enough information is known about the project at this time, they will offer a tripwire for project-planning approval. In some instances, they also offer criteria for prioritizing all of the POS documents that senior management will be reviewing.

At one time, IBM required a financial analysis from the project manager as an attachment to the POS. At the time, they were my client and allocated 4 hours for the project manager to complete the financial analysis. Project managers are typically not professional financial analysts, and 4 hours is not much time. So, the resulting analysis will be cursory at best, but it does lend some information relevant to financial feasibility.

Following are types of financial analyses you may be asked to provide. Keep in mind that the project manager may not be a financial analyst, and requiring an in-depth financial analysis may be beyond their ability.

➢ Cost and Benefit Analysis
➢ Breakeven Analysis
➢ Return on Investment
➢ Cost-Benefit Ratio

For further details refer to (Wysocki, 2014a and Wysocki, 2014b).

Prioritize the Alternative Projects

The first tactical STEP in every portfolio management model involves prioritizing the projects that have been shown to be aligned with the portfolio strategy. Proposed projects are usually grouped into funding categories or aligned under Objectives, or under the Strategies that align under Objectives.

Each group defines a potential portfolio. When finished, each group will have a list of prioritized projects. Dozens of approaches could be used to establish that prioritization. Some are nonnumeric; others are numeric. Some approaches are very simple; others can be quite complex and involve multivariate analysis, goal programming, and other complex computer-based algorithms. My approach is to identify methods that can easily be implemented without any pre-requisite knowledge or experience, and which do not require a computer system for support, although sometimes a simple spreadsheet application can reduce the labor intensity of the process. This section describes the models commonly used for establishing priorities:

➢ Forced ranking
➢ Q-Sort
➢ Must-Do, Should-Do, Postpone
➢ Criteria weighting
➢ Paired comparisons
➢ Risk/benefit matrix

For details on each of these models see (Wysocki, 2014a and Wysocki, 2014b).

Select the Project To Be Proposed

STEP 1 ends with the selection of a project to take into STEP 2. Several prioritization lists may have been created for the potential projects identified in the affinity packages. The decision will

be based on both quantitative and qualitative data. In the final analysis, these data are guidelines for a decision that is first a good business decision. It would be unusual if all prioritized lists have the same project as highest priority, but it has happened. It is in keeping with the ECPM Brainstorming Model if more than one project were proposed. Let the best project survive the approval StageGate.

> **The Business Case is the foundation and referent for all project decisions in ECPM Framework projects. It maintains alignment of the project to the expected business value validated for the project.**

Project IDEATION Phase STEP 2: Elicit Requirements

Many authors will use the term "Gather" with respect to building the list of requirements. That suggests the requirements are just laying around and waiting to be picked up and added to the requirements bucket. In complex projects, nothing could be farther from the truth. The term "Elicit." suggests that requirements must be discovered and drawn out for documentation and addition to the list.

Project management thought leaders are of like mind in that requirements are rarely complete during project definition. Beyond the complexity and uncertainty the project is affected by the changing internal environment and external market dynamics. Managing a complex project is of course complex by definition but the challenge is further increased due to incomplete requirements. The situation is not hopeless and there are mitigation strategies that are available in the ECPM Framework during the Project IDEATION Phase.

Project IDEATION Phase STEP 3: Write A Project Overview Statement

A Project Overview Statement (POS) is the first formal document that describes the project idea at a high-level and is used for general distribution. It is written in the language of the business so that anyone who has the occasion to read it, will understand it. No "techie talk" allowed. It is only one page, so there isn't an opportunity to say much other than a few basic pieces of information.

Definition of the Project Overview Statement

The POS is brief—one page is always sufficient. A POS basically summarizes the RBS. A POS template with an example is shown in Figure 2. The POS contains the following five sections::

- ➢ A statement of the problem or opportunity (reason for doing the project).
- ➢ A goal statement (what will generally be done).
- ➢ A statement of the objectives (general statements of how it might be done).
- ➢ The quantifiable business outcomes (what business value will be obtained).
- ➢ General comments on risks, assumptions, and obstacles to success.

PROJECT OVERVIEW STATEMENT	Project Name **Common Cold Prevention Project**	Project No. **15 - 21**	Project Manager **Carrie deCure**

Problem/Opportunity

There does not exist a preventative for the common cold.

Goal

Find a way to prevent the occurrence of the common cold.

Objectives

    1.. Find a food additive that will prevent the occurrence of the common cold.
    2. Alter the immune system to prevent the occurrence of the common cold.
    3. Define a program of diet and exercise that will prevent the occurrence of the common cold.

Success Criteria

The solution must be effective for at least 90% ofpersons of any age.
The solution must not introduce any harful side effects.
The solution must cost the consumer less than $20.00 per dose.
The solution must be accepted by the FDA.
The solution must be obtained over the counter at any pharmacy.
The solution must return at least 20% gross profit.

Assumptions, Risks, Obstacles

Assumption: The common cold can be prevented.
Risk:The solution will have harmful side effects.
Obstacle: Drug manufacturers will hinder the search for a cure.

Prepared By **Earnest Effort VP Project Management**	Date **3-14-2015**	Approved By **Hy Podermick VP Research & Development**	Date **3-14-2015**

Figure 2 A Typical POS Template with Example Data

After more than 50 years of managing projects, I can honestly say that I have always been able to write a one-page POS regardless of the scope of the project. Being able to write a one-page

POS means that you really understand the project and can communicate it intelligently to senior management. Think of it as though it was the two minute elevator speech and you won't go far astray. I've seen project initiation documents as large as 70 pages. I'm not sure who reads these, if anyone. If they do, do they really understand the project at the level of detail needed for granting approval to create the project plan? I doubt it! A document of that length may be of value to the development team but not to the sponsor and certainly not to the executive who will be approving it.

Seek StageGate #1 Approval

StageGate #1 is the senior management approval to proceed to the Project SET-UP Phase. Along with this approval is the release of the resources that will be needed for that phase. There is still a lot about this project that has to be defined before any version planning work can be done and one more approval STEP (StageGate #2) before the actual work of the project is authorized and budgeted by senior management.

There will be occasions when the POS is not approved. This usually means that the sponsor has not made a compelling argument for the business viability of their intended approach to the problem or opportunity. Despite the fact that the business need may be critical, the risk of failure is weighed against the expected business value of the solution. Expected business value may not justify the cost of the project. It does not mean that the project is not important to the executives, just that the approach chosen does not make good business sense. Some other approach is needed. The sponsoring business unit is invited to revise and resubmit the POS. Alternatively, the POS may be rejected without further consideration.

PUTTING IT ALL TOGETHER

In this article we described the ECPM Framework Brainstorming Process which spans STEP 1 of the IDEATION Phase. It is a robust process that will have application in several contexts.

In the IDEATION Phase we have brought an idea from a very informal statement of need or opportunity to a initial definition of one or more prioritized projects and finally to a choice of the initial project to be pursued. The IDEATION Phase is ended with a one page statement of that project that is forwarded for management approval. The IDEATION Phase includes the first three STEPs to defining a project and seeking the resources and authorization to proceed to the SET-UP Phase.

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