

Project Management Fact Sheet:

Steering Committee 'nuts and bolts'

Version: 1.2, November 2008

DISCLAIMER

This material has been prepared for use by Tasmanian Government agencies and Instrumentalities. It follows that this material should not be relied upon by any other person. Furthermore, to the extent that 'this material is relied upon', the Crown in Right of the State of Tasmania gives no warranty as to the accuracy or correctness of the material or for any advice given or for omissions from the material. Users rely on the material at their own risk.

This Fact Sheet is aimed at inexperienced Steering Committee members. It describes the 'nuts and bolts' of Steering Committee meetings, roles and responsibilities of members and the Committee collectively, and provides a number of personal development opportunities in this area. Definitions for all project management terms used within this document can be found on this website in the *Project Management Glossary*.

The Tasmanian Government has developed the *Project Management Guidelines*, which is the recommended project management methodology for managing projects within the Tasmanian State Service. A key element in this approach is to establish an appropriate management structure (governance) for the project. In medium to large projects, this includes establishing a Steering Committee. The effectiveness of a Steering Committee is dependent upon the level of commitment demonstrated by members and the experience members have had in this role.

"Steering Committees should solve problems – not create them"
(Rob Thomsett, 1993¹)

What is a Steering Committee?

A project Steering Committee is the key body within the governance structure which is responsible for the business issues associated with the project that are essential to the ensuring the delivery of the project outputs and the attainment of project outcomes. This includes approving the budgetary strategy, defining and realising outcomes, monitoring risks, quality and timelines, making policy and resourcing decisions, and assessing requests for changes to the scope of the project.

The membership is determined by the Project Sponsor and may consist of:

- the Project Sponsor, who normally chairs the meetings

- the Business Owners
- representatives with project management governance expertise
- representatives from selected key stakeholders
- experts from within the agency
- external, independent representatives, who may be probity auditors, quality consultants, specialist consultants or representatives from another agency

The Project Manager is not a member of the Steering Committee. He/she is 'contracted' by the Steering Committee to ensure the work of the project is undertaken as agreed, whereas the Steering Committee provides support, guidance and the executive oversighting of progress

The Project Manager will normally attend meetings of the Steering Committee to speak to their reports and answer any questions raised by members. An additional resource (such as a project team member or administrative staff) may attend to assist the Project Manager by recording the minutes and decisions of the meeting

What does the Steering Committee do?

Collectively, a Steering Committee's role is to:

- take on responsibility for the project's feasibility, business plan and achievement of outcomes
- ensure the project's scope aligns with the agreed requirements of the Business Owners and key stakeholder groups
- provide those directly involved in the project with guidance on project business issues
- ensure effort and expenditure are appropriate to stakeholder expectations

- ensure that strategies to address potential threats to the project's success have been identified, costed and approved, and that the threats are regularly re-assessed
- address any issue which has major implications for the project
- keep the project scope under control as emergent issues force changes to be considered
- reconcile differences in opinion and approach and resolve disputes arising from them
- report on project progress to those responsible at a high level, such as agency executive management groups, Heads of Agency, or Cabinet
- depending on the nature of the project, take on responsibility for progressing any whole-of- government issues associated with the project

The components of the project that are to be monitored by the Steering Committee are documented in a *Project Business Plan*. Once developed, the plan defines the project scope and the Steering Committee as a whole must own the document.

What role do individual members perform?

Individual Steering Committee members are not directly responsible for managing project activities, but provide support and guidance for those who do. Thus, individually, Steering Committee members should:

- understand the strategic implications and outcomes of initiatives being pursued through project outputs
- appreciate the significance of the project for some or all major stakeholders and represent their interests
- be genuinely interested in the initiative and the outcomes being pursued in the project

- be an advocate for the project's outcomes by being committed to and actively involved in pursuing the project's outcomes
- have a broad understanding of project management issues and the approach being adopted

In practice, this means they:

- ensure the project's outputs meet the requirements of the Business Owners and key stakeholders
- help balance conflicting priorities and resources
- provide guidance to the project team and users of the project's outputs
- consider ideas and issues raised
- foster positive communication outside of the Committee regarding the project's progress and outcomes
- review the progress of the project
- check adherence of project activities to standards of better practice both within the organisation and in a wider context

The Committee may choose to adopt *Steering not Rowing: A Charter for Project Steering Committees and their Members, Tasmanian Government Project Management Guidelines* Alternately, Terms of Reference may be developed and adopted by the Committee. A *Steering Committee Terms of Reference* template is available from this web site

The Project Sponsor should provide each member of the Committee with a briefing of the project to enable all members to contribute fully to the process.

As members are selected based on their individual knowledge and skills that they bring to the Committee, there can be some confusion and conflict in the accountability of members. The first responsibility of members is the achievement of the project's success and secondly to their agency, organisation or business area. Similarly, members who have expertise in a particular area should avoid taking a narrow view of their responsibility.

How often do Steering Committees meet?

The frequency and duration of the meetings will depend on the size and complexity of the project. The meetings should be often enough that progress can be reported against a number of milestones since the last meeting. A project milestone is different to a project task/activity. A milestone does not involve any work, it can be seen as a progress 'marker'. For example, 'Training Plan developed' is a milestone, whereas 'Develop Training Plan' is a task/activity.

Ideally, the timing for the meetings should be linked to key milestone dates (including the end of a phase), and not to a pattern; for example, the last Friday in the month. Prior notification of meeting dates/times should be provided to members via an agreed meeting schedule.

What happens before each meeting?

At least five (5) working days before each scheduled meeting, you should receive the business papers for the next meeting. They should include:

- an agenda
- minutes of the last meeting, including an action list
- a progress report on the status of the project since the last meeting prepared by the Project Manager
- other documents to be considered at the meeting (if any)

What happens during each meeting?

The Project Sponsor usually chairs the meetings. The Chair will conduct the meeting according to the agenda, ensuring that all members are encouraged to provide input throughout the meeting and that any decisions or recommendations are adequately resolved and confirmed by the members. A basic agenda would include:

- confirmation of minutes from previous meeting
- reviewing the status of action items from previous meetings
- report on the status of the project by the Project Manager
- discussion on other documents to be considered (if any)
- report from Quality Consultants (if any)
- any other business
- confirmation of date, time and venue for next meeting

Steering Committee members, have the opportunity to raise any issues not previously discussed at the meeting under the item *Other Business*. The Chair will arrange for the meeting to be minuted.

Examples of other documents that could be discussed at the meetings are *Project Business Plans*, *Outcome Realisation Plans* and *Project/Phase Reviews*. Large projects are generally broken into phases, which are discrete, logical chunks of work normally carried out in sequence.

There should be a review done at the end of each phase. This enables the Steering Committee to confirm that the phase has been successfully completed and determine if the project should proceed to the next phase. This involves confirming the scope, time, cost and resources for the next phase.

What happens after each meeting?

Within a week of the meeting, a copy of the minutes of the meeting should be circulated to all members. This is far more effective in ensuring that the minutes accurately reflect the decisions and discussions of the meeting. Members are more readily able to recall what was discussed at the time and ensure that any important issues or comments raised during the meeting have not been inadvertently overlooked.

What should the Project Manager be doing?

The Project Manager should be busy managing the project according to the agreed *Project Execution Plan* and/or *Project Business Plan*. This will involve the management of:

- project scope
- time
- cost
- quality
- change
- issues
- human resources
- stakeholders
- communications
- risk
- procurement

The Project Sponsor should meet with the Project Manager on a more frequent basis. The Steering Committee can expect the Project Manager to objectively report to them on the status of the project, including any problems or issues that require their direction.

Where to get additional help

- Refer to the *Tasmanian Government Project Management Guidelines*
- The Inter Agency Policy and Projects Unit offers further advice and assistance, including a formal Advisory and Review Service
- Contact Project Services at project.management@dpac.tas.gov.au
- Further information and resources are available from www.egovernment.tas.gov.au
- Refer to the *Getting Started as a Steering Committee Member* on this website
- Definitions for all project management terms used within this document can be found in the *Project Management Glossary*
- The Tasmanian Government's policies and guidelines on procurement, contracting and probity are available at <http://www.treasury.tas.gov.au>
- Templates for standard documents such as a *Project Business Case*, *Project Business Plan*, *Outcome Realisation Plan* and *Project Status Report* are available on this website
- Formal reviews of phases or complete projects can provide an insight into areas where problems can arise within a project. A selection of Project and Phase Review reports are available on this website
- The latest schedule of courses available by The Training Consortium is available at <http://www.ttc.tas.gov.au>

Acknowledgements

This Fact Sheet contains elements of the *Tasmanian Government Project Management Guidelines* prepared by the Department of Premier and Cabinet.