

The difficult questions you must ask of your strategy

Because when projects succeed, society benefits



Introduction

The pace of change in today's business landscape means an organisation's needs are never static. Technology is constantly changing and new challenges are emerging. Creating effective strategies is not easy.

Business leaders need to have confidence in their strategy and its ability to deliver transformation, or risk falling short. An Association for Project Management (APM) survey of business leaders in the UK found the biggest obstacles to successful strategic execution include inadequate change delivery mechanisms and resistance to change. Project management principles and professional project practitioners can be the difference for business leaders when it comes to strategic execution.

This paper explores the questions that you should ask to apply a project-centric approach to change, ensuring your strategy remains as effective as possible in the face of continual upheaval.

Contributors



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Is my strategy deliverable?



There is a two-way connection between projects and strategy. A strategic vision can be thought of in terms of constituent projects or programmes, but those projects and programmes also need to be reviewed to ensure they support the vision.

A new project could look fantastic on paper, but it's important to ask how it will fit into the wider overall strategy. Objectivity is crucial. Even in situations where there is a fit, it's important to look at a project with open eyes, considering the levels and types of risk it can bring, which ultimately affects ability to hit projections for success metrics.

To avoid this, business leaders need to know how to manage and mitigate the potential risks before committing funds to the project and/or before employees take on work. Of course, most organisations have levels of assurance and assurance frameworks throughout,

but it is vital that, as a business leader, you fully understand the risks, the causes and the effects of any potential project.

Depending on how 'hands-on' your leadership style is, serving as a project sponsor can be an excellent way to acquire this understanding. Alternatively, if your preferred style is more 'hands-off', you can appoint someone with the relevant competences to the sponsorship role and have them feed regular updates to you.

Is the proper sponsorship in place?

Leaders need to understand how projects are effectively supervised. Being a good 'customer' for projects and programmes is difficult. Some people are very good at developing ideas, but not as good at delivery. This comes down to an individual's ability to be an effective sponsor. Unfortunately, the concept of project sponsorship isn't widely known among business leaders.

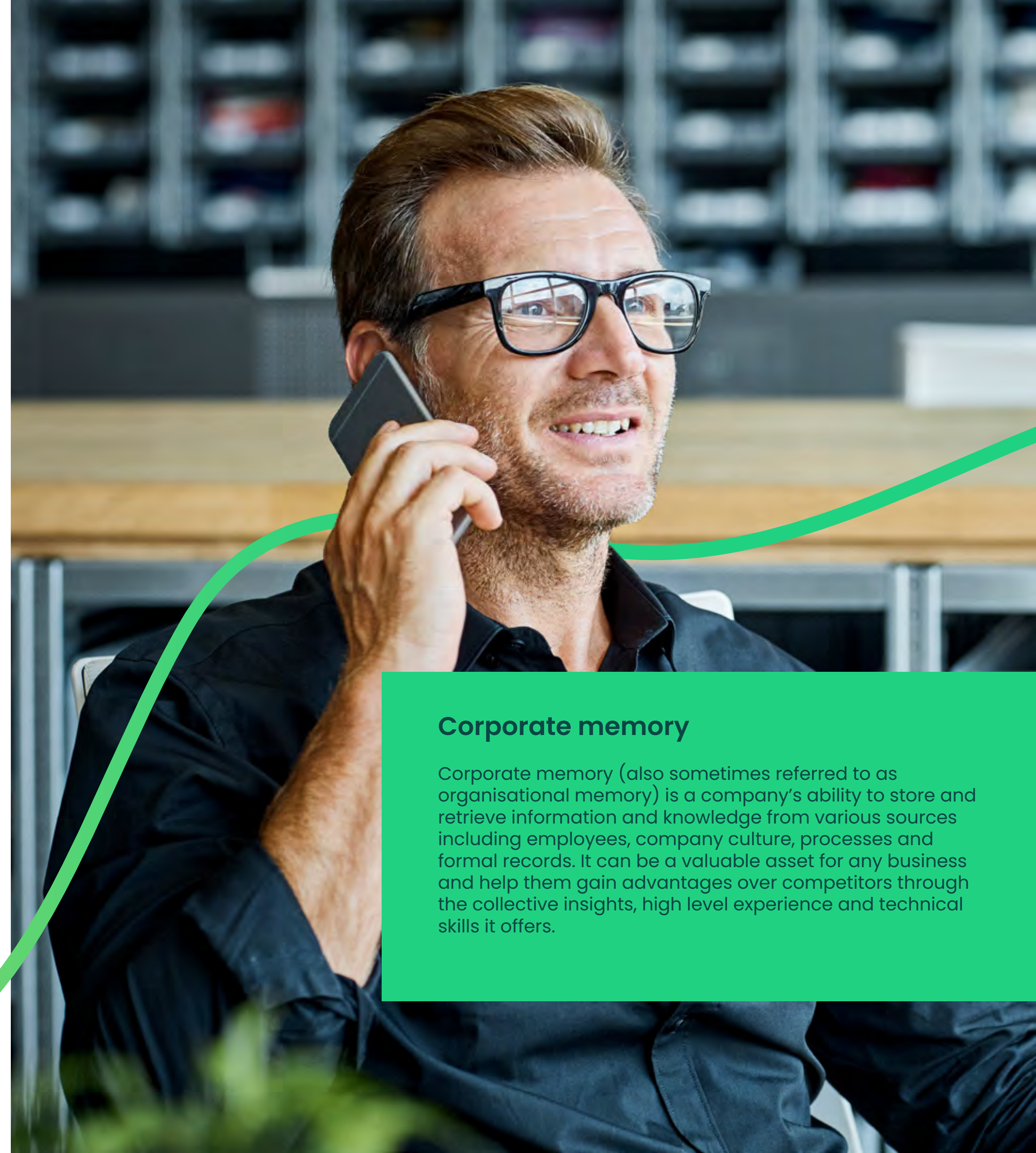
As defined by the *APM Body of Knowledge 7th edition*, project sponsors are business leaders who play a critical role as part of the governance board of any project, programme or portfolio. The sponsor is accountable for ensuring that the work is governed effectively and delivers the objectives that meet identified needs. An effective project sponsor will be able to work across corporate and functional boundaries within the organisation, advocate for the work and the change it brings about, and influence stakeholders.

Exactly who the sponsor is depends on the project or programme. It might be someone directly involved, or it could be someone from elsewhere within the organisation with the relevant experience. There could even be multiple sponsors depending on the complexity of the project and organisation.

Some leaders proceed with a project despite major warning signs because it could be strategically beneficial; for example, the project could be an avenue into a new market. In this situation, project sponsors are able to offer an unbiased perspective and make an informed decision by ensuring that corporate memory is taken into account.

Corporate memory

Corporate memory (also sometimes referred to as organisational memory) is a company's ability to store and retrieve information and knowledge from various sources including employees, company culture, processes and formal records. It can be a valuable asset for any business and help them gain advantages over competitors through the collective insights, high level experience and technical skills it offers.



How will you integrate transformation with business as usual?

The ability to continue performing while also delivering transformation is crucial. No organisation wants to stop customer delivery programmes or cease delivery of essential services whilst implementing a change.

Looking at this from the strategic perspective, it's important to think about how transformations work in parallel with business as usual operations. There must be integration between the two for any project or programme to be successful.

There are things business leaders can do to aid this integration:

- Invest in the necessary levels of communication across the organisation and help shape that messaging. Employees need to be made aware of the transformation happening, including what changes it will result in and why this is a positive for the business. If not, there is a risk that employees can become disillusioned and not fully embrace the changes being implemented.
- Don't assume your business has everything it needs once a transformation is finished. For example, are there any knowledge or communication gaps left? While the technical knowledge may have been documented, the informal insights and small pieces of knowledge can sometimes be lost during the process of change.

Even where integration is managed well, today's world presents different (and greater) levels of complexity and uncertainty that can cause a transformation to fail. Factors at play today, such as big data, were not common concerns 20 years ago. There needs to be the correct level of business acumen within your organisation to avoid these potential barriers to transformational success.

Projects and functions need to have a very strong alignment. It's crucial to avoid falling into old traps by improving on and learning from what has been done in the past. This can be done by avoiding 'additive' behaviours (e.g. putting more processes in place to address an issue, rather than doing real 'root cause' analysis). Instead focus on:

Culture

Creating a 'one team' culture – a collaborative and united way of working that encourages people to work together towards shared goals – can be hugely beneficial, as it fosters greater collaboration, communication and productivity throughout.

While one team cultures are generally a positive thing, they are not without risk. An effective one team culture must exist in an environment of psychological safety, where colleagues are encouraged to share differing views, in order to prevent the onset of groupthink.

Data strength

When stepping into a data/digital environment, getting data standards and data reliability in place is a must. While the gap between where a business is and where it needs to be is not always clear, prioritising data and using its capabilities to the fullest potential are essential steps forward. Strong data will help business leaders to make informed decisions and identify trends that can offer a competitive advantage.

Is your strategy resilient enough?

The resilience of a strategy is becoming an increasingly important part of ensuring long term strategic success. There are so many factors at play, both internal and external, that cannot be controlled or predicted, all of which can affect a business strategy. It's important to look at your strategy objectively and decide whether it is able to handle and adapt to future challenges.

Some business leaders will point to risk management practices as their preparation for future challenges. While this is valid to some extent, a truly resilient strategy takes the organisation from a narrow focus on risk reporting to a longer-term strategic view of the total environment. This approach helps organisations embrace a more holistic view, in which resilience becomes a competitive advantage in times of disruption.

To achieve this, build-in change to the way you strategically approach and deliver in the commercial structures that are being used (e.g. supply chain), the way you build up specification and the way you plan the outcomes. Essentially, it's about being able to leave your options open as long as possible when projects are implemented. Without built-in change, a strategy becomes much more inflexible and brittle, making it difficult to make any changes needed to address potential problems.

However, this is not to say decisions shouldn't be made when circumstance calls for it. It is important to be proactive. No business leader wants to leave themselves in a position where, if something needs to change, they find they're unable to do so. Plan for change, but be confident enough to deviate from the plan if you have to.

Similarly, if decision making is being delegated, make sure the people making the decisions have the flexibility and autonomy to make decisions that don't lock them into one place. This is where a project professional can be most effective. A project professional isn't only focused on delivering the project(s), they also understand the future landscape. They can help foster strategic resilience that leaves businesses prepared for events that haven't happened yet.

Future-proofing the C-suite

Successful future-proofing is a balancing act that can increase resilience, improve agility and help businesses stay ahead of the competition. The key to effective future-proofing in the C-suite is the addition of project expertise. This does not necessarily mean having a project professional sat in the C-suite; such an appointment is certainly worthwhile, but may be prohibited by the size, scale and complexity of an organisation. In these cases, it can be more effective having project and programme directors who are responsible for their portfolios and report into someone in the C-suite or even to a sub-committee of the board. Nevertheless, accountability at the C-suite level is always necessary, but not always done sufficiently.

When executives in the C-suite communicate with project professionals, the conversation should be focused on strategic alignment to goals and the desired transformation that will help realise those goals. Avoid the pitfall of talking to project professionals only about tasks. It's a misconception that project and programme managers are exclusively task-focused. They are, in fact, strategic changemakers who are best placed to deliver change when they understand and share a vision. Articulate that vision clearly and help them visualise the outcomes.

Final thoughts

Being able to continuously assess, question, re-evaluate and adapt your strategy is vital. Asking these questions of your strategy will ensure that both it and your organisation are better placed to meet the ever-changing demands of the future.

The most successful business strategies evolve over time in order to meet change head on and, in many cases, actively drive that change. Utilising a project-centric approach to strategic change will empower a business to better adjust to challenges, execute plans more swiftly, and achieve results that deliver true value. Utilising the skills and experience of project professionals in planning, communication and leadership will ultimately help to realise an organisation's strategic goals and prepare them for the future.



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The Association for Project Management (APM) is a professional membership organisation that sets the standards for the project profession and raises its profile. APM is the only chartered organisation representing the project profession in the world. As a registered charity, APM delivers learning and networking opportunities, qualifications, research, resources, events, and best practice guidance for the project community, helping the profession deliver better.

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