TOWARDS A SYSTEMS THINKER: THE USE OF AGILITY PRINCIPLES IN COMPLEX PROJECTS

Written by:

Olanrewaju Adebayo
Managing Partner,
Leshlair

Samir Is-Hak
Founder and CEO,
Xynoptik

Introduction

Program and Project Management (PPM) has traditionally, and till present day, been carried out using frameworks and methodologies that contain a set of practices and linear processes to be followed (e.g. Managing Successful Programme (MSP), PRINCE2 Methodology, Project Management Body of Knowledge etc). Over the years, the notion of 'agile' project management has gained prominence as a methodology that facilitates iterative delivery in a more rapid and collaborative manner. However, for complex projects characterised by uncertainty, ambiguity, interconnectivity and turbulence, there is increasing evidence that the exclusive use of such frameworks and methodologies result in project and program failure. With future trends indicating that PPM will remain an essential discipline for delivering organisational and societal change, there is a growing requirement for project leaders to deploy techniques that appropriately respond to complexity.

This paper will explore agility in the context of systems thinking. The article commences by providing an overview of systems thinking, prior to discussing how systems thinking draws upon agility concepts across various disciplines to incorporate rapidly changing environments. Two system thinking models (Conceptual Modelling and the Viable System Model) are then provided to demonstrate how agility concepts can be applied. The paper concludes by providing three recommendations project leaders can utilise to increase agility in complex projects.

A Systems Thinker

Considered simplistically, a project is a temporary undertaking aimed at achieving a certain outcome over a defined period. From a traditional lens of project management, the focus lies on defining and sequencing activities through a waterfall methodology. By default, this leads to the development of solution designs that are separate in nature and which effect a one-way linear relationship between competing factors. In addressing such limitations, the notion of agile project management frameworks such as Scrum and Kanban have gained prominence, particularly in the software development industry. Whilst part of the concept's popularity is derived from the consulting sector, agile project management is considered favourable in achieving outcomes through short, iterative