

## **The Case for Assurance**

In the second in his series of articles on exploring ways to improve project and programme delivery, Allen Ruddock of Transformis Consulting discusses the case for assurance reviews.

### **What do we mean by Assurance?**

Nobody sets out to under deliver in their projects or programmes. The wise manager increases their chance of success by taking advantage of all appropriate tools, techniques and processes available to them to help them succeed. One of the key processes is assurance. This is a series of checks and balances, some internal to the project or programme and some independent of it, designed to ensure that objectives are met, quality deliverables produced and benefits delivered. The key component of the assurance process is independent assurance reviews.

### **Why have Assurance Reviews?**

An internal review of all major change programmes within an international bank revealed that all programmes that had some form of independent assurance process embedded in the programme's management approach had a status of green i.e. the programmes were on track with no significant risks or issues outstanding that might de-rail the project. All other programmes (i.e. those without any independent assurance process) were either amber, some issues to be addressed, or red, requiring urgent management attention.

From this you could conclude that good project managers recognise the value provided by independent reviews and take up the advice from them. Alternatively, it could be said that less experienced or failing project managers either ignore the need for independent review and advice or don't recognise they need it. Whichever is true, there is a prima facie case that independent reviews reduce the risk of failure. Let's explore how to make it an open and shut case.

### **What's in a Review?**

In order to make the case for assurance reviews, we need to understand what the objectives of the review are and what the key activities are to achieve those objectives. Any review encompasses looking at five key facets:

- the objectives;
- the processes;
- the plan;
- the resources;
- the stakeholders.

The aims of the review are twofold:

1. to ensure that the objectives of the programme/project under review are realistic and aligned to the overall business' objectives and strategy, and
2. to ensure that the other facets of the programme/project are aligned to meet those objectives.

The core theme throughout is the delivery of benefits. All projects and programmes seek to deliver benefits, either directly or indirectly by supporting other projects that

do. The assurance process seeks to ensure those benefits are both realised and maximised.

## **The Mechanics of the Review**

### Objectives

Before undertaking a review the reviewer must have a clear understanding of the objectives of the project or programme and there must be agreement that they are sound. The review then focuses on capability to execute and execution.

### Processes

Are all the necessary processes in place? Are they appropriate to the project/programme? Are they being followed? Do they support the plan?

### Plan

Is the plan realistic? Is it more detailed in the short term, less detailed further out? Is it maintained and progress tracked against it?

### Resources

Are adequate resources of the right type available in a timely manner? Are they dedicated or part time? What is the span of control over the resources?

### Stakeholders

Have all the stakeholders been identified? Has their attitude to the project/programme been assessed? Is there a stakeholder management process in place and is it being followed?

## **Who Should Undertake Assurance Reviews? (The Case for Independence)**

First and foremost the reviewer must be an experienced project or programme manager (as appropriate). Secondly, they must be independent of the management of the project or programme they are reviewing.

They could be part of a specialist review team or a peer running another project or programme. Alternatively they could be sourced from specialist providers outside of the organisation. The pro's of this are that the external resources are likely to bring a wider perspective and will not be encumbered by internal politics. The con's are the lead time in gaining an of understanding of your business and its processes, methodologies etc. A way round this is to outsource the review process to a firm that invests time in understanding your business and processes in return for a guaranteed level of work performing reviews.

## **The Real Benefits**

The opening gambit of this article was that all projects benefit from independent assurance. The real benefits come from an assurance process that is embedded as part of a change culture. Reviews can then assess projects and programmes against a set of agreed standards, collating statistics to be used to drive improvements, sharing best practices and learning from others experiences.

## **Conclusion**

No project or programme is without its problems. It is how those problems are managed that determines the degree of success or failure. A well defined and implemented assurance process helps to improve problem management, promotes learning and sharing of experience, and thereby increase the level of success.

Transformis Consulting have extensive experience of setting up and running independent review processes and functions and of conducting such reviews. For more information on our programme and project reviews and assurance solutions contact Allen Ruddock via e-mail ([allen.ruddock@transformisconsulting.co.uk](mailto:allen.ruddock@transformisconsulting.co.uk)) or phone (07768 463833) or visit the Transformis Consulting Ltd website at [www.transformisconsulting.co.uk](http://www.transformisconsulting.co.uk)