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Methods for setting objectives and mission breakdown structure¹

by Eva Riis, University of Southern Denmark

Mission breakdown structure

Projects should create value for the organisations that instigate them or that will make use of their outcomes. This requires there be greater attention paid to defining the value expected of them, and it intensifies the need to formulate clear project objectives. Both tasks are complicated by the lack of a common terminology when setting objectives. This paper will propose concepts and a tool that should have a natural place in every project manager's toolbox.

'Setting objectives' refers to both project missions (also known as 'purposes', 'wider objectives' etc.) and project objectives (milestones, deliverables). A key requirement is that objectives can be clearly separated from one another.

Project missions should be analysed in depth so that all intermediate stages necessary for achieving value are clearly described. Intermediate stages, which can also be called 'sub-missions' or 'sub-purposes', must be established; they make clear the desired direction and they also flesh out what the beneficiary organisation must provide in order to achieve value after a project has ended.

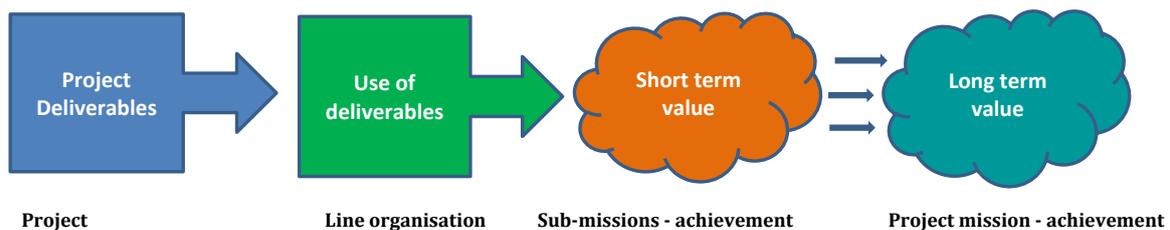


Figure 1: Project and value

By defining sub-missions or interim effects and describing their relationship to the project objectives, a solid basis is put in place for making correct decisions during implementation. It also allows for checking the relevance of the project objectives, such as whether they contribute to the sub-missions, or, conversely, whether the sub-missions are truly supported by the project objectives and deliverables. Elaborating on the project missions and placing them in the context of the objectives of the project leads to a **mission breakdown structure**.

Mission and sub-mission

Examined vertically and beginning at the top, a mission breakdown first states a project mission and this might be a part of the company's or organisation's corporate strategy. A mission is stated effectively when it expresses the value that important stakeholders expect will be created by the project. The mission is formulated in the present tense to distinguish it linguistically from objectives and activities. Missions should not be stated as a change. An example of a mission often used in the literature concerns the Opera House project in Sydney, where the mission of the project was *Sydney is known in the world*. Another example concerns the introduction of a new financial management system in an enterprise whose mission was *high standard of management accounting in the company*. Project objec-

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tives, for example, might include system implementation, employee training, customized workflows, etc. It is the nature of the project that determines how high up in the breakdown one declares the mission statement.

For major projects in the public sector there is often a societal goal preceding the mission, such as the use/benefits that society will obtain from the project.

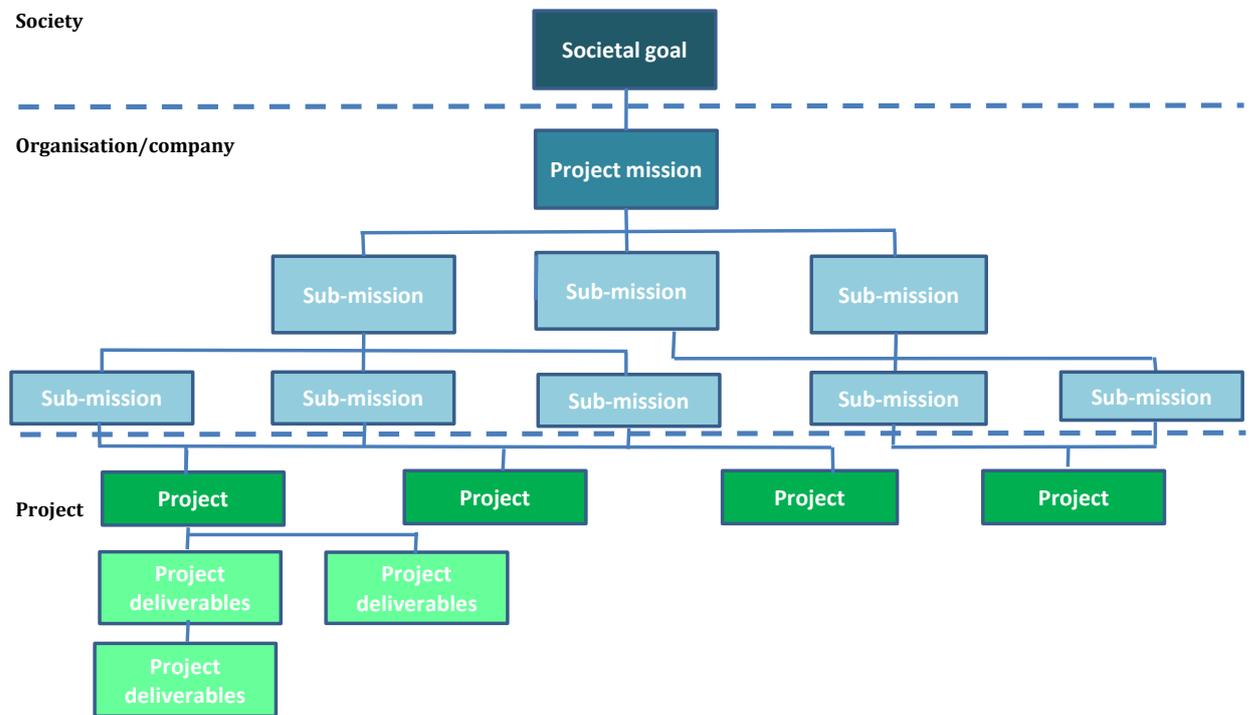


Figure 2: Mission Breakdown Structure

The project contributes to achieving the mission and sub-missions, but is never solely responsible for them. There are always factors, both externally and internally, that impact on the achievement, and hence value, that a project contributes to an organization. In most cases, one can see value only a year or so after the project has ended, if not longer.

The mission/purpose of a project is the ‘property’ of the Steering Committee or project owner. But the project manager has a responsibility to ensure that there is a well-articulated mission breakdown structure at the start of the project. If the project mission/purpose is not described properly (the description could be some insightful phrases, a collection of PowerPoint slides, or project objectives labelled as the project mission, etc.), the project manager must draft the mission and sub-missions statement and get it approved by the Steering Committee or project owner. Here lies one of the strengths of the mission breakdown structure: assembling important stakeholders and decision-makers in a project to discuss what it is exactly that the project is intended to contribute and what is required from the project environment during implementation and beyond the project’s completion.

It is critical to a project’s success that the mission is stated in a way that can be referred to throughout the duration of the project. When unexpected events are encountered during implementation and decisions must be made rapidly, the project mission and sub-mission statements ought to provide direction – and there is rarely time to begin formulating them at such a time.

The project mission/purpose statement must be broken down into *at least* two levels, usually stating sub-mission/intermediate purpose. A single level would not contain enough information to make a mission breakdown structure useful.

Project objectives

Project objectives are what the project manager is responsible for meeting by the end of the project, at the latest. A project can have several objectives (see the example below). Project objectives are elsewhere in the literature referred to as ‘result goals’, ‘targets’, ‘outputs’, the ‘end product’, and in some places ‘success criteria’.

Sub-objectives or deliverables

Project objectives can be further broken down into sub-objectives or deliverables, and these appear one level below where the concrete output of the project does in the hierarchy.

Sub-objectives or deliverables are termed ‘product goals’ or even ‘activities’ elsewhere in the literature. Sub-objectives or deliverables should be SMART (described in most textbooks on project management). In smaller projects breaking these down further is often unnecessary.

Example

Figure 3 presents an example of a mission breakdown structure. It refers to the introduction of a new financial management system in an organization. However, there is no definite mission breakdown structure – it all depends on the project: what is taken into account and how far one moves down the levels of the hierarchy (how many levels of part-deliverables are included, for example) and how both are formulated. It is very much the discussion about building the mission breakdown structure that is important.

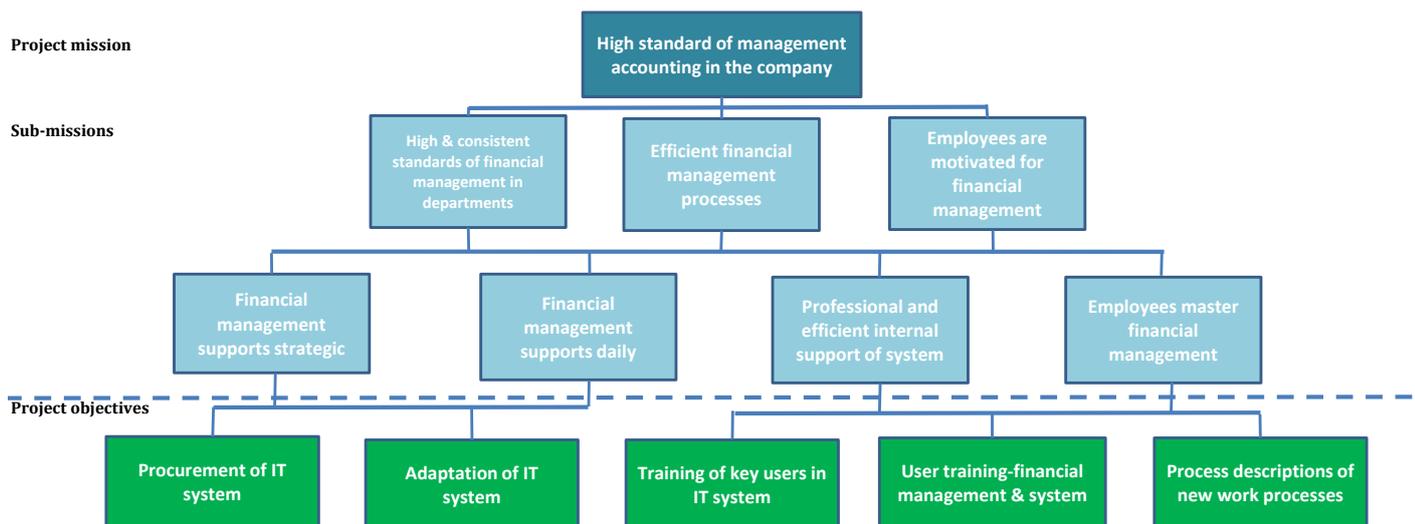


Figure 3: example of a mission breakdown structure for the introduction of a new financial management system in a company (based on Andersen, Grude & Haug, 2004)

How the mission breakdown structure is drafted

A mission breakdown structure should provide a good summary of the project. It should be prepared by the project team in collaboration with the Steering Committee and other key stakeholders. A flip-chart should be used where available for visualising the mission breakdown structure; alternatively, a large sheet of paper that can be hung up on a wall. Thick felt pens and post-it notes are useful for quickly moving between levels as one designs the mission breakdown structure.

Working through a mission breakdown structure takes time and can be challenging, but it is an incredibly powerful tool that can be referred to throughout the project's implementation. It greatly helps communicating between the project and the Steering Committee, other management, and the rest of the organization and it helps to ensure that the right decisions are made.

Enjoy!

Reference: Andersen, E.S., Grude, K.V. & Haug, T. (2004) *Målrettet Prosjekstying*. NKI Forlaget, Bekkestua.



Eva Riis is a PhD fellow at University of Southern Denmark where she teaches graduate courses on project management. She participated in establishing the professional *Master in Project Management Programme* at the University of Southern Denmark. Earlier, she has been an adviser on developing and implementing project portfolio systems on the national level in Hungary, Slovakia, Bulgaria and Albania and on formulating project proposals for EU financed projects. She holds an M.Sc.Eng. from the Technical University of Denmark.
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