Philosophies & Principles
# Used to shape planning approaches[1]

Any output from a planning process is an embodiment of, and expression of, the fundamental principles and philosophies (ie, approaches) applied by the planners to develop their plan[1]. Different people will develop different plans to achieve the same objectives[2] based on their knowledge, experience and attitudes.

The approaches employed by the planner may be explicitly stated or may be implicit and taken for granted, and are affected by:

- The values, preferences, beliefs and culture of the organisation and its planners, and
- The circumstances under which planning is done.

The conundrum[3] facing organisations is deciding what is the best approach to apply to the development of a 'plan' to create the best outcomes, in the most efficient way, within a given set of circumstances, and in a given cultural environment. There are no right answers to this question and no way of knowing if the chosen options have delivered the desired result until after the plan is implemented. Each project is unique making tests and comparisons impossible.

Some of the approaches that can be used in combination, or isolation, include:

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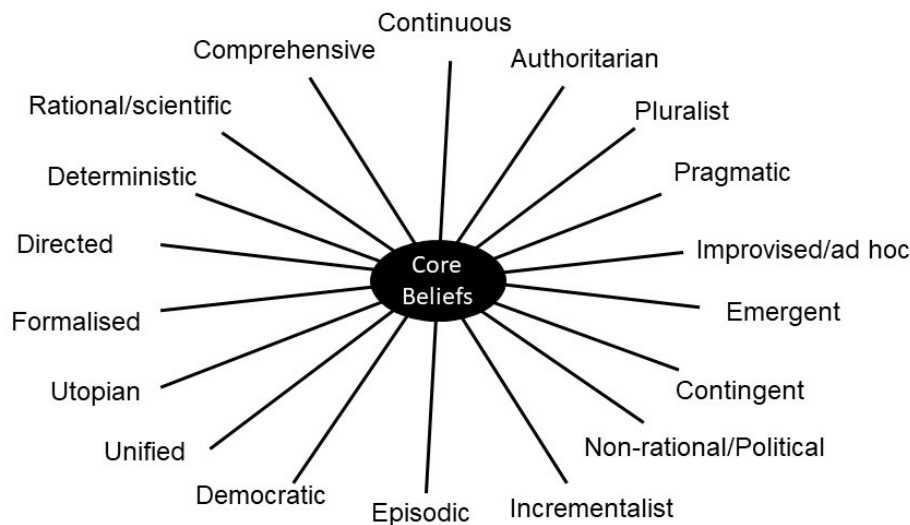
[1] This article is adapted from a lecture on strategic planning, developed by Dr. Lynda Bourne as part of the IT Governance module of the Maters of Information Technology degree at Monash University, Australia.

[2] In the early 1960's James Kelley noted that in a class of 20+ people being taught the new CPM approach to scheduling developing a 16-activity schedule from a set class exercise would result in 9 to 10 different schedules. He is quoted a saying '*Best* can only be gauged relative to the planner's ability and experience and his view of the project objectives and environment'. See: https://mosaicprojects.com.au/PDF-Gen/Kelley+Walker-PMN-1989.pdf

[3] A **conundrum** is an intricate and difficult question that only has a conjectural answer, see: https://mosaicprojects.com.au/WhitePapers/WP1053_Decision_Making.pdf

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The diagram (above) pairs opposite approaches, your decision is where on the continuum is best for you in the current situation. The options are:

Rationality/science -v- Non-rationality/politics

A rational, or 'scientific approach' assumes all issues can be resolved through analysis based on logic and reason, this approach is based around developing scientific explanations for the elements of planning, and applying analytical techniques.

Whereas a non-rational, political approach assumes a range of intangible factors such as ideology, power, beliefs, values, emotion, aspiration, and/or dreams drive outcomes. This approach is built around managing competing ideologies and values, the politics of power, and where necessary, winning the clash of ideologies and belief systems.

Comprehensiveness -v- Incrementalism

A comprehensive approach to planning assumes it is necessary to identify and deal with all of issues which are relevant to the current and future situation to optimise the outcome. It requires an understanding the total system based on analysis and strategy development to cover all known issues and interactions. The requirement to develop a detailed 'contract program' at the beginning of a project fits into this school of thinking.

Incrementalism is an 'agile' approach[4] that assumes it is best to select the issues that can/should be dealt with now and only developing detailed plans for the immediate future (although an overall strategy may still be needed). The challenge is deciding how to choose what to focus on next.

Determinism -v- Contingency

A deterministic approach assumes you have the ability to identify and control the key variables which affect or determine outcomes. This requires you to find the key variables and understand their effects on the outcome. You then have to manage the key variables to ensure the desired future is achieved.

A contingent approach assumes that you cannot control all of the variables, and therefore you need to prepare for a range of possible outcomes whose likelihood can only be guessed. This approach focuses on the management of uncertainty and risk[5] and is about developing strategies for alternative futures.

Directedness -v- Emergence

A directed approach assumes that planning comes before action, you develop the master plan, then act to implement the plan. This approach is central to traditional project management.

An emergent approach assumes plans emerge from actions; you don't make plans, they happen! Practice is focused on monitoring, identifying and (if necessary) formalising plans and strategies as they appear.

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[4]   For more on *using Agile* see: https://mosaicprojects.com.au/PMKI-XTR-010.php#Process1

[5]   For more on *managing risk and uncertainty* see: https://mosaicprojects.com.au/PMKI-SCH-045.php

Formalisation -v- Improvisation

A formal approach to planning assumes that there is a requirement for formal structured processes and works to develop the *right* formal processes. Once the processes are defined and documented, practice is about implementing the formal process regardless of circumstances.

Improvisation assumes creative and adaptive processes are best. Leaders look to inspire creative ideas and then adapt the processes to the circumstances. Management is about choosing the most appropriate processes which suit current circumstances.

Utopianism -v- Pragmatism

A utopian view assumes it is possible to create a vision and set ideals to which we can aspire. Developing the vision and working towards it frames action.

A pragmatic view assumes that you have to deal with immediate problems and make compromises to get something which can be made to work. It involves problem-solving[6] and negotiating[7] compromises to deal with current problems.

Unity -v- Pluralism

Unity is a philosophy that assumes the organisation or team is unified and the plan is for everyone. Planning are based around creating consensus and support for agreed common goals, objectives and actions. Then articulating and implementing the agreements.

Pluralism assumes that the organisation or team consists of a federation of competing interests; any plan will favour some at the expense of others creating conflicts in objectives and values. Practice is about managing these conflicts constructively.

Authoritarianism -v- Democracy

An authoritative approach to planning assumes that the work of planning should be done by those with the authority and expertise to do it; dissenting voices should be suppressed. It is based around the maintenance of power structures and the authority of experts. Implementation involves 'blindly' following the plan, doing whatever the experts think is best and what suits those in authority. This is a 'command and control paradigm.

A democratic approach assumes we all have an equal right to participate in decision-making and planning; the majority rules. A democratic approach focuses on ensuring participation and allowing every voice to be heard to find the majority view. People feel involved and motivated to implement the plan they have helped develop.

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[6]   For more on **problem solving** see: https://mosaicprojects.com.au/WhitePapers/WP1013_Problem_Solving.pdf

[7]   For more on **negotiating** see: https://www.mosaicprojects.com.au/WhitePapers/WP1024_Negotiating.pdf

Episodic -v- Continuous

An episodic approach to planning assumes that the planning function is undertaken at specific times for a nominated planning period; ongoing planning between these events causes uncertainty. The challenge is to identify the right timing and duration for each planning activity. Implementation is about setting up and running the planning activity whenever it has been scheduled and then focusing on implementing the plan as developed.

A continuous approach assumes planning is an ongoing activity; there is never a time when one stops planning. Planning integrated into everyday work in the form of daily 'stand-up' meetings and/or 'management by walk-around[8]'. As unforeseen events emerge, the plan is adapted to deal with the current status.

Applying the Approaches
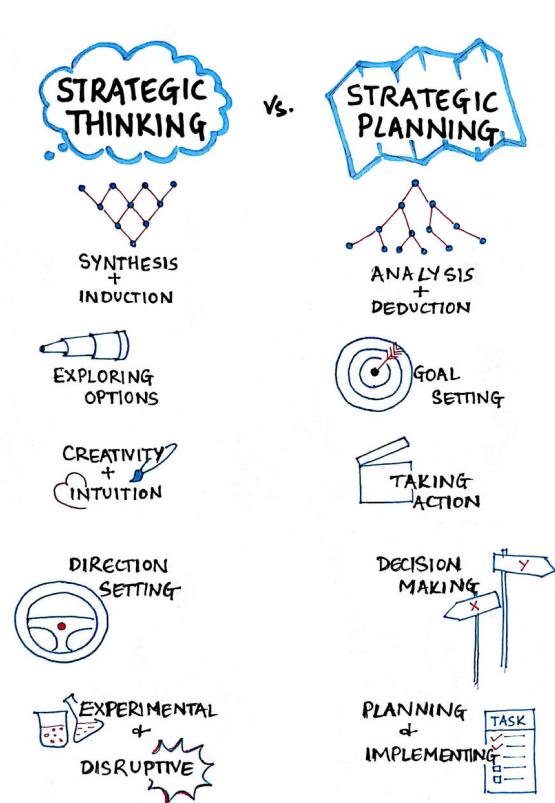
Each of the dimensions outlined above describe two extremes. In some situations, one extreme or the other may be best; much of the time a more balanced approach tending towards one end or the other is likely to be better.

The challenge is first to think strategically about the choices open to you and how the different approaches will contribute to project success, then implement the strategy and plan the planning by making informed decisions about where on each of the dimensions is best approach for you in the current circumstances[9].

Making overt choices rather than just doing the normal 'thing' will generally lead to better planning outcomes. For example, an agile project will require a planning approach that leans towards using: non-rationality, incrementalism, contingent, emergence, improvisation, utopian, pluralistic, democratic and continuous approaches to the planning activity. Whereas a traditional 'hard dollar' engineering contract tends to require the opposite.

My recommendation is thinking through these options, offers you an opportunity to improve your

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8   *Management by walkaround* (MBWA) involves the team leader or manager taking the time to literally 'walk around' the team chatting to people and enhancing his/her personal connections to the team members. However, this is not an aimless process, during MBWA the manager focuses on understanding the attitude and commitment of the team, listens carefully for issues and emerging problems and provides timely direction, coaching and support. The insights gathered during MBWA are then used to inform subsequent management decisions and actions – the informality will often open up insights to information that could not be communicated formally. For more on *management* see: https://mosaicprojects.com.au/PMKI-ORG-015.php

9   For more on *setting the project strategy* see: https://mosaicprojects.com.au/WhitePapers/WP1038_Strategy.pdf

planning practice; one approach will not suite every project and simply doing the same as last time will inevitably lead to a suboptimal outcome.

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