STEERING COMMITTEES THAT DON'T CHICKEN OUT

The best Steering Committees act like pigs

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Prologue: Chickens and pigs

The metaphor of pigs and chickens is used powerfully to underline the commitment to the roles in the scrum – from the agile project management methodology. The same principles apply to the steering committee members of any project:

... the pig turns down the chicken's offer to join her in opening a Bacon & Eggsre-staurant. The pig felt that she would be truly committed, while the chicken would only be involved!

We need full commitment from the steering committee members – we need them to be pigs, not chickens, who chicken out when the though gets going.

Summary

For project steering committees to perform excellently all members need to offer their full commitment to the project – they all need to be pigs. In addition four other skills and competencies need to be present in the steering committee (see figure 1).
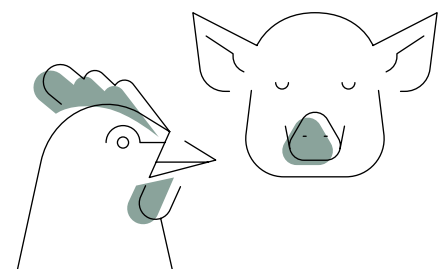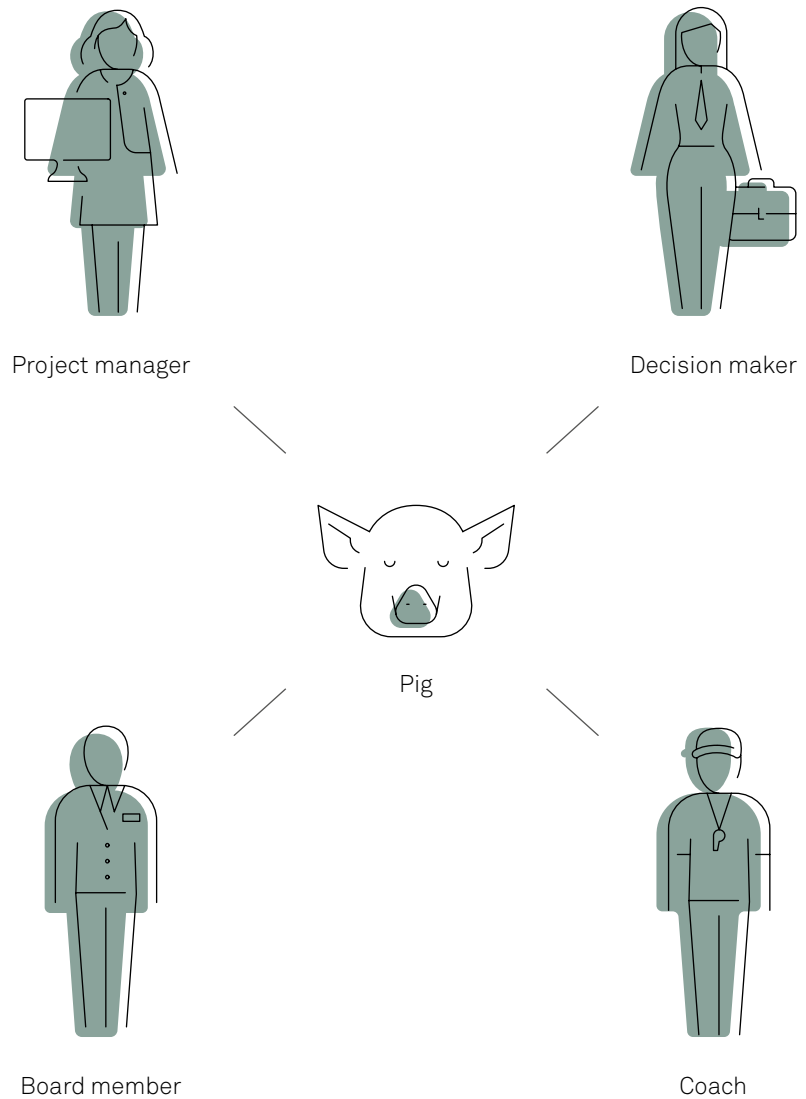
Figure 1: **The 5 faces of the steering committee.**

Project manager

Decision maker

Pig

Board member

Coach

All steering committee members have to be pigs at all times, but not all of them need to cover all the other four areas. The four areas must however be covered by the full steering committee together, that – by the way – must act as a team!

Getting all steering committee members to act as pigs, creating excellent steering committees, and thereby heavily increasing the chances of successfully in projects in a given area, requires a change journey. A change journey that respects the fact that ownership has to be created amongst middle and upper management: Ownership of the pig role, and ownership of the four additional skills and competencies of steering committees. Middle and upper management are typically the members of projects' steering committees.

Example 1:

Steering Committee Code of Conduct (StC CoC)

One company had worked with a steering committee for their IT project portfolio for a long time, but the steering committee didn't work as well as they should. For one thing the steering committee members didn't act as pigs. In the worst cases steering committee members (including the chairman) consistently didn't prioritise the steering committee meetings and didn't show for the meetings.

In this case it was chosen to call the guidelines "The Code of Conduct" to stress that the steering committees should act according to these expectations – also the title got the odour of policing – actually part of the guidelines were formulated as paragraphs (§§§).

The elements of the Code of conduct were:

1. A hat (that steering committee members should mentally put on at each meeting) with the objectives, responsibilities and values of the steering committee – the project phase model to underline the steering committees' role in this

2. A presentation of the code of conduct that is given to all steering committees at their first meeting

3. A template for a steering committee code of conduct contract that is filled in with the project name and the names of the steering committee members. The contract is then signed by all steering committee members and kept by the chairman (i.e. the project owner). This is for the steering committee members to show their commitment towards each other and the project.

A specific deliverable of the change journey is guidelines for project steering committees. Subsequent communication of these guidelines is crucial in successful implementation, and hence the guidelines are often named and formed to underline their specific intentions. Examples of powerful naming: "Steering committee code of conduct" and "Steering committee survival kit".

1. Steering committee excellence is the most urgent next step

Many organisations have in recent years made a wholehearted effort to improve the success of projects within their organisations. This includes initiatives like training of project managers and building project management methodologies. Having looked across industries of different sizes, global reach and maturity within project management – in our opinion and experience – the single most value creating effort you can do is to improve the work of project steering

committees, because it is crucial to the success of your project portfolio - and thereby the development of your organisation. The work of steering committees is not good enough in most organisations and the high-quality work of a steering committee is a prerequisite to succeed with other initiatives within the realm of projects.

Importance
There is no simple formula for getting success with projects. A number of factors influence this. Most organisations, however, are realising that the work of the steering committee and the project owner are important factors of these – maybe the most important – in tough competition with the capabilities of the project manager.

Situation
So, how well are steering committees performing in your organisation? The most common answers to this question range from "we could do much better" to "we are at ground zero in this".

Asked about which of the five dimensions of steering committees (see figure 1) no dimension seems to do well, but the pig-dimension is especially mentioned as an improvement area.

Prerequisite
The performance of the project's steering committee can also be considered a crucial prerequisite of project success. In other words: a poor steering committee can ruin any project, but a well-functioning steering committee is a basic necessity to give a project a chance to succeed (in addition to a number of other success factors – e.g. the capabilities of the project manager). An example of this is: The excellent project manager can make an excellent decision making package, but if the steering committee doesn't have the capabilities to make the right decisions on top of this, it doesn't matter how good the decision making package was.

Steering committee
Even though organisations and project management methodologies name and define project roles differently most of these have a group of people that assists the project owner (also often called project sponsor) in fulfilling their responsibilities. The overall and most important responsibility is to take overall ownership of the project and the effect of the project. We call this group the steering committee of the project. Size and composition of the group will depend on the nature of the project – and how well the five areas in this article are addressed.

2. Board of the company "Project Inc."
In many ways you can compare a project to a company. In both cases you have an organisation of people that together wish to achieve one or more objectives. In this analogy you compare the project manager to the CEO, and the steering committee to the board of the company. The project owner is the chairman of the board. The board analogy accentuates the three following competencies of a steering committee.

Business
No matter what type of project the steering committee is heading – e.g. IT project or project development project – all the traditional business school disciplines are relevant in supporting and challenging the project – e.g. investment management, people management, strategy and risk management. Often these disciplines are not represented deeply in the project management itself, as this is often staffed on the basis of the functional area of the project.

Focus on objectives and effect
In challenging and supporting the project – at initiation and during execution – it is vital that the steering committee doesn't focus only on milestones, progress, budget and technical aspects of the solution and deliverables, but also – maybe mainly – on the business applicability of the solution, the benefits, the objectives and business effect of the solution. Often, projects drift, to focus on "technicalities" during the project, and in this situation it is especially important that the steering committee focuses on the bigger picture – the effect to be achieved.

The holistic picture
It is important that the steering committee together as a team, sees and always remembers the full picture of a project. This goes for all phases of a project, but especially at approval, at the "expensive" gate in the beginning of the project. The gate between planning and execution – in some companies referred to as "the golden gate". In fact it is not too difficult to remember all elements of the holistic picture at all times – they can be summarised under these four headings:

4. *Why* are we doing the project (e.g. business case)

5. *What* is the project delivering (e.g. scope)

6. *How* will the project make it happen (e.g. schedule)

7. *What risks* are there in the project – within all three of the above.

3. The steering committee as coach

Motivator

Another way of seeing the role of the project manager is that they are the captain of a soccer team. In this case the project owner and the steering committee are the coaches that must motivate the captain and the team to win the soccer match – or actually the championship. The average project will experience many battles / matches.

A specific situation for this could be when the steering committee has discussed and agreed what the project manager should do about a big problem the project has encountered – at that time the steering committee must not only focus on the facts, but also on the mood of the project manager and the team. This is especially true if the project manager or the team could actually have done better in avoiding the encountered problem. It is still the project manager and the team that we count on to counteract the problem.

Often the individual steering committee members represent groups of project group members – in this case it is also the task of these steering committee members to motivate them.

Inspiration

Often a happy and comforted project manager and project team members are not enough to make the project happen. More drive is needed – enthusiasm is needed! As with motivation this is also the task of the project manager (towards the project team members), but it is a difficult task, and often the steering committee members are good at this and are in a position that can put power behind it and make it happen.

At the very least, the steering committee members are obliged to act with enthusiasm themselves when talking about the project outside the steering committee meeting room!

Paving the way

The expectations on the steering committee in this area actually go beyond motivating and inspiring the project manager and team members. They are also expected to pave the way for change outside the project organisation. A project – per definition – always endeavours to make a kind of change happen – this could be new business processes, an updated IT system or new products for the market. The steering committee members are expected to help making these changes happen and take effect – especially in the areas they represent in the steering committee.

If any steering committee disagrees with the project somehow – e.g. does not desire the change that the project implements – then this must not be voiced outside the steering committee. This is called loyalty. It is however also considered loyal to voice any concerns in the steering committee and to leave the steering committee if you cannot back up the project.

4. Steering committee meetings

The actual work of the steering committee happens in and around the steering committee meetings. Hence, it is crucial that these meetings are good. In some projects a large part of the steering committee work also takes place informally in the corridors. This type of work can also be important – and valuable – but it does not substitute for the need for good meetings! In line with this, it is necessary that all steering committee members are good meeting participants. A good meeting leader must also be driving the meetings. Normally this should be the project manager – in close coordination with the project owner / chairman.

Preparations

At least three elements need to be in place as preparation for each steering committee meeting:
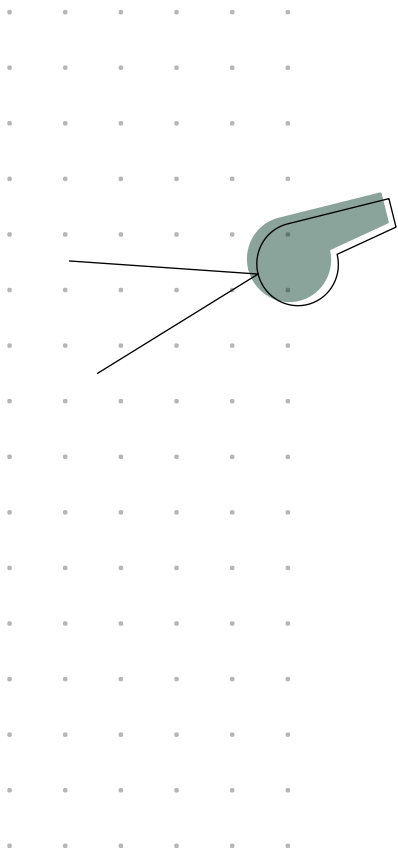
1. The *project manager* and others that own the items on the agenda need to prepare for these, and also prepare the pre-reading and other material for the steering committee members in due time. This also goes for the meeting agenda and notice of meeting. Due time is at least 3 working days! Even though this rule will sometimes stretch the project manager and others, we cannot ask meeting participants to prepare seriously for the meeting if they don't have the material in due time. They need the time to pay respect to the work done in the preparation! Remember that steering committee members are often busy people with very busy calendars.

2. The *steering committee members* must be prepared for the meeting: read the pre-reading, decide their preliminary opinion on decisions and topics to be discussed and discuss issues with other people before the meeting if they deem this necessary. To be able to do this it is important that the notice of meeting is clear on the decisions to be taken at the meeting.

3. The project manager must ensure that all *practicalities* are in place and ready for the start of the meeting. This may sound as an unimportant detail, but evidence shows that these things tend to matter for the outcome of the meeting, so have coffee and cake ready, and have the projector up and running when the meeting starts!

Execution of the meeting

There is no magic formula for the successful execution of a steering committee meeting, but there are a few best practices that should be considered:

1. The single most important thing for 90% of steering committee meetings is to *take decisions* – good decisions. Focus on this when preparing and executing the meeting.

2. A basic – but apparently difficult – rule is that steering committee members need to *be present* at the meeting.

To take decisions – and show basic commitment. This is the general rule. If a member cannot – as an exception – show up for a meeting, she must send a replacement that has the mandate and knowledge to make decisions on her behalf! If too many members decline the meetings it's an indication of one of two things: 1) They are not the right people to be members of the steering committee and/or 2) The project is not important enough – and should be terminated!

3. Use your *meeting time* efficiently! We have a general rule that the meeting members are well prepared for the meeting! Hence the time should not be used for presentation of information that they have already read. As a rule of thumb the meeting should be split three-ways: 1) a little time for presentation and "setting the scene" for decisions, 2) a lot of time for discussion leading to decisions and 3) focused time for taking and confirming decisions.

4. A pitfall to have in mind during the meeting is for the steering committee members not to go into too *much detail* on specific solutions. Partly because this is very time consuming, but mostly because this is not the role of the steering committee. This is the role of the project manager and the project team members. Hence park detailed issues early for the project manager to handle!

Action

Actually the most important thing about steering committee meetings is not what happens at the meeting, it is what happens after the meeting. No matter how good the decisions made at the meeting are, they are worth nothing if they are not implemented! Generally speaking this is the responsibility of project manager (supported by the project owner). In some cases other steering committee members may also assist in making some actions happen, and if any steering committee members between meetings get a bad feeling in their stomachs because they

suspect that decisions are not being acted on as expected they have an obligation to contact the project manager or project sponsor. This is part of being as committed as a pig!

Another best practice to ensure that the many issues and decisions discussed in a steering committee are progressing is the action list in the notice and minutes of the meeting that is followed up upon at each meeting.

It goes without saying that the minutes of meeting are prepared, distributed and commented in due time!

5. Project management skills in the steering committee
Project management
Do all steering committee members have to be experts in the project management discipline? Knowing all tools in the project manager's toolbox and the latest fancy ideas within project management? The answer is a clear NO.

BUT all steering committee members need to know the simple basics of project management such as: what is unique about a project compared to operations, what is a project schedule and what is project risk management. If steering committee members don't have a background in projects, this is easily learned by a simple standard course or project management book. The time spent on this is time well invested. This enables the project manager and the steering committee members to communicate without too many misunderstandings.

Also at least someone in the steering committee should be relatively experienced within the field of project management – and perhaps also have a feel for the latest trends in the area. This is to be able to challenge and inspire the project manager to a satisfactory degree. An aggressive – but efficient – rule could be that someone in the steering committee should be certified in PMI (PMP level), IPMA (B-level) or similar.

Project management methodology and project governance
The expectations for carrying out projects in an organisation, or in more or less confined areas of an organisation, are formalised in project management methodologies, project models, project governance rules or similar. Not all steering committee members need to know the details of these, but they do have to know the basics of these and they do need to know that they exist. Especially they need to know what expectations that are in these guidelines concerning the steering committee work – the project governance outline will contain the description of the roles and responsibilities of the steering committee.

Another example of what the steering committee needs to know about the organisation's guidelines for projects is the project phases, defined in the project management methodology, the gates in it and the gate keepers. The steering committee will often be the gate keeper of some gates, and the steering committee will in all cases be expected to challenge and approved a project before it is forwarded to overall gatekeepers such as the project portfolio committee.

As is the case with the project management discipline it is also a good idea if there is at least one member in the steering committee that knows the organisations project guidelines in more detail. Remember that these guidelines – e.g. the project management methodology – in many cases are built on top of the experiences – good and bad – of former projects in the organisation.

6. Implementation
Change journey
Achieving excellent steering committees – including having steering committee members act like pigs as a key element – is a change in the way most organisations work with projects and project governance today. No matter what process (i.e. project approach) you choose to make this change happen, it
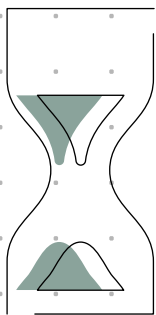
is important to acknowledge that it is a change journey where you strive to change how a lot of people think about projects steering committees.

The deliverables at the end-goal of the change can e formed in various ways, but if you are working systematically with project management, and do have a project management methodology or similar it is a good idea to create guidelines for steering committees within this framework, that formally communicate the expectations to the steering committees. These guidelines can be formed in various ways and also differ in content. Two short case examples are descried in example boxes – two guidelines addressing two different needs and with different storylines to match.

Example 2:

Steering committee survival kit

The division of another company was in a totally different situation. They had just started to work systematically with projects across the division, and had just implemented their first simple cross-divisional project management methodology that amongst other things contained role descriptions, a project phase model and templates for project approvals.

In this case the steering committee members hadn't participated in steering committees before and they were new at working with projects in a systematic manner. In this case the steering committee guidelines were named "Steering committee survival kit" and contained:

1. Specific expectations for the steering committee members and the project managers respectively before, during and after a steering committee meeting

2. Guidelines for composition of a steering committee

3. The "must knows" of the project management methodology. The must knows were: the gate decision criteria, the project approval story line and role descriptions.

On both example 1 and 2 the steering committee guidelines are interwoven deeply within the work of the project management methodology and project governance in the organisation. If done smartly this will be a win-win-situation, as the steering committee guidelines make best sense in a institutionalised project governance and project management methodology, and seeing it from the other perspective the steering committee guidelines help promote and implement the project governance and project management methodology – all to the benefit of the performance of project portfolio and the development of the organisation.

The five elem article – pig, coach, meetings, board and project – and a lot of other best practices about steering committee work may be used as inspiration and guidance to create the guidelines for your organisation, but it is essential that you organisation and the current and future steering committee members take ownership of these guidelines. Hence the guidelines should be created in the context and history of your organisation, by the right people in your organisation.

The soldiers of Thundershield
Who then are the right people to create the steering committee guidelines? The right people are the "soldiers of Thundershield" of steering committees. That handful of people, who participate in a large number of the steering committees of the projects in the portfolio. That same handful of people, who project managers and owners always wish to have on

board the steering committee of their projects. They are the key stakeholders of this change journey, and they know the lessons learned – good and bad – from many former projects. (please read about Thundershield in the " explanation box").

Don't' make the journey too complex. Design a simple process that deeply involves these soldiers of Thundershield to build the guidelines. The next step is to communicate these guidelines to all relevant people, and start using it in real projects in the project portfolio – e.g. exclude steering committee members that don't prepare for the meetings.

wars between Sweden and Denmark/Norway at that time. Thundershield had – together with a small group of his bravest soldiers – conquered a strategic city in Sweden. The citadel in the city hadn't however surrendered. A meeting was agreed between Thundershield and the Swedish commandant of the citadel – to take place down in the city. When the commandant walked along the main road towards the agreed meeting place Thundershield made his few soldiers run from cross section to cross section on the small roads off the main road to make the commandant think there were more Danish/Norwegian soldiers than there actually were. The trick worked and the commandant surrendered. Hence, the term "the heroic, but few soldiers of Thundershield."

Explanation:

The soldiers of Thundershield

The term the soldiers of Thundershield is a widely used Danish term (Torden-skjolds soldater), that refers to a group of people you'll always see in a lot of different contexts in the same realm. This could for example be the same group of people you see at all (or many) of the steering committees of the projects in your portfolio. Normally it is seen as a positive thing to be amongst the soldiers of Thundershield and the demand for your help is normally very big. Another example could be that it's always the same middle managers you see being involved in the strategy work, the new marketing plan, the quarterly meeting, etc – and this is a clear sign of rising stars!

The history behind the term is interesting (mostly for Danes and Norwegians, but not for Swedes) and also illustrates an excellent project management skill to have: ingenuity. Thundershield was not an American Indian as his name might indicate, but a Danish/Norwegian admiral who lived in the 18th century. The story took place during one of the countless

You get what you measure
One last – but certainly not least – thing to do to make your steering committee members to act like pigs: Include the success of the project as a personal goal in the steering committee members' individual people performance goal. In this way the members' appraisal – and bonus – also depends on the success of the project. Why shouldn't it? Working with projects – the development of the organi-sation – should be one of the most impor-tant tasks people do, and not an ad-hoc task done more or less in your spare time!

Complexity and simplicity
This is not complex, in many ways it is simple to comprehend what we would like to do - it is however difficult to do! And please be careful, it will become an insurmountable task to achieve if you in any way make the solution complex. The reason why even the simple solution is difficult is that you are trying to change human behaviour and values, and in many ways you are building part of a manage-ment system. A management system for projects that co-exist with the manage-

ment system for operation and mainte-nance that most of us know as the line organisation.

Making excellent project steering commit-tees in other words share the common theme of project governance: It is not complex, just difficult!

Striking a balance – the dilemma of steering committees

We do think that it is important to imple-ment simple solutions and we also believe that the analysis of the current situation should not delve deeply into too complex details.

There are however many dilemmas in the work of steering committees. These need to be acknowledged, and it's necessary to strike the right balance in addressing them.

Steering committee ownership vs. the project manager's role

The steering committee needs to take full ownership of the project, the results of the project, the business effect and the anchoring in the organisation. At the same time it is important that the steering committee does not take away power or ownership away from the project manager. The project manager is expected to play the role of CEO of the project, and his board – the steering committee – shall support him in this, while at the same time showing full ownership and commit-ment towards the project themselves.

Therefore, strike the right balance between steering committee ownership and the project manager's power.

Coherent team vs. energizing discussions

The steering committee shall act as one team – aiming for the same objectives. The steering committee shall not be all about politics where the individual members only care about what is the best for their individual areas. On the other hand, many members are included in the steering committee because of their knowledge and/or position in this area of the organ-isation and shall therefore represent it in the steering committee. The meetings should also contain lively and energizing discussions that ensure the best deci-sions – therefore disagreements and constructive discussions are an essen-tial part of the best steering committee meetings.

Therefore, strike the right balance within the steering committee creating one coherent team and hold steering committee meetings with lively discus-sions.

Appreciation of the project manager vs. examination of the project manager

The steering committee must motivate the project manager and appreciate her effort, truly acknowledging the results she has achieved. Sometimes the project manager must be motivated to carry out projects that are close to mission impos-sible. On the other hand the steering committee should also challenge the project manager – testing her and the project. This can sometimes feel like an exam at school, but it is important that the steering committee get a feeling for how solid the project is and how stable the project manager is. The project manager should be able to keep standing in most weather conditions – including tough storms coming in from the sides.

Therefore, strike the right balance between appreciating the project manager and testing her or the project.

These are perhaps the two most impor-tant dilemmas, but there are plenty more for the steering committees to strike the right balance between: the big picture

vs. quality check of details, short vs. long term benefits, time vs. quality and high risk vs. low effect.

Epilogue

What are the specific recommendations? What should I do to make the work of project steering committees in my organisation excellent?

• When staffing your steering committees you should ensure that all steering committee members are pigs. And ask all chickens to leave the steering committee

• When composing the team that is your steering committee you should ensure that all the 4 additional skills and competencies are present to the required level

• You should find the soldiers of Thundershield of steering committees in your organisation, and get them to share your vision of excellent steering committee work

• Initiate a simple (but difficult) process that creates and implements the steering committee guidelines of your company

• Make win-win with other efforts within the field of project management such as project management methodology, project governance and project excellence

• Before, during and after the implementation of the guidelines of steering committees you should gauge the performance of the steering committees. Because their performance is crucial for the performance of your projects performance and because you get what you measure.

Acknowledgements

This article is based on real life experiences from projects that have implemented guidelines for project steering committees – more or less successfully. Hence a big thank you is hereby given to current and past colleagues, and the organisations we have been working in, with and for.

The metaphor of pigs and chickens is taken from the book "Agile project management with scrum" by Ken Schwaber where it is used for other project management roles – but we also believe it describes the vision for project steering committee members commitment well, and actually all situations where you are craving for full commitment.

FAST FACTS
ABOUT IMPLEMENT

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