

## How To Energize Decisionmaking: A Framework For Project Success

By Tom Richert

Building design and construction capital projects benefit from clear types of engagement among the sets of working groups. This clarity includes a mutual understanding of areas of authority for certain types of decisions. Often decisions lie in limbo because it is unclear who is responsible for deciding an issue, especially when decisions are intended to result from team collaboration.

A lean capital project delivery methodology starts to address this concern by defining clear working groups. In this model, there are cross-functional working groups, a core project management group, and an executive group. Implicit are functional groups that collectively work on the same tasks.

If your project is not explicitly following a lean methodology, it will still benefit from adopting this multi-tiered approach. The balance of this article first defines each of these groups, then shifts to identifying the types of decisions for which each group may be responsible. There is one important caveat to the information below. While it serves as a general framework, every project has distinct needs based on the organizations and personalities involved, as well as the program scope.

### Capital Project Groups

#### Executive Group

This group is often composed of principals or senior executives from the major stakeholders in a project. The stakeholders include a representative from the project owner, construction manager, and architect. If there is an owner's project manager involved, they should also be represented. Some projects may include representatives from other stakeholders, such as a consulting engineer and trade contractors with significant amounts of critical work.

This group should meet quarterly, and otherwise as needed. They function like a board of directors, with the project owner serving as chair. The

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owner retains authority over scope and cost decisions, with other members of the group serving as advisors supporting assessments of decision alternatives.

### **Core Project Management Group**

This group includes project leaders from the major stakeholders. These need to be people responsible for leading people from their organization and the organizations contracted to the project through them. On large projects, they are usually dedicated to the project full-time. At a minimum, the group includes a representative from the owner, sometimes an owner's project representative, the construction manager, and the architect. At times, some core group members may also be the same people that serve on the executive group. On projects using a poly-party agreement that includes consultants and trade contractors, it is beneficial to have a representative from each in the group. Work to limit group size to six members. The core project management group should meet at least once weekly. One group, which happened to be co-located in the same project office full-time, found that short meetings three times each week worked better.

### **Cross-Functional Working Groups**

Common names for these types of groups include Work Clusters, Functional Teams, Component Teams, and Project Implementation Teams. There are several such groups on a project. The membership in these groups includes people with different professional skills because they are focused on decisions that require expertise beyond everyone's individual training and experience. During design, these groups are organized by building components, such as building structure, interior finishes, and landscaping. There should also be a construction implementation and logistics group during design. As construction begins, group formation is focused on workstreams, such as operating room systems rough-in, patient room finishes, or curtainwall construction in the case of a hospital. The complexity of a project informs the number of groups required. Work to limit membership to five to eight members.

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### Functional Groups

These are groups that work collectively to complete tasks. During design, examples include structural engineers, architectural designers, and soils engineers. Construction examples include electrical crews, floor finish crews, and roof installation crews. Normally, everybody in a functional group works for the same organization, and the group is led by a project manager or crew leader.

### Decisionmaking Tiers

The following framework is a guide for determining the types of decisions for which each group is responsible. It is more important that your project has a framework than it adopts this specific approach.

### Executive Group

- **Mission and goals:** The purpose and budget for the project are often established by the project owner executive leadership. The executive group refines any ambiguity through a restatement of the mission in specific, measurable terms. The executive group may also choose to establish more challenging financial and completion goals.
- **Project management group leadership:** The executive group is responsible for identifying the members of the core project management group.
- **Stakeholder financial incentives:** If there are financial incentives for attaining performance goals, these incentives should be understood among executive group members, even if negotiated directly between the owner and one or more of the stakeholders. This awareness promotes trust, mutual understanding, and collaboration. Secret deals erode those qualities and hinder project performance.
- **Financial and schedule oversight:** While design and operational decisions impacting costs and schedule are made by the core project management group, the executive group has a responsibility for project performance information in case their intervention is required.

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- **External stakeholder and community relationships:** Because the most impacted relationships external to the project involve employees of the owner organization and often the community in which the project is to be constructed, issues related to managing these relationships should often be addressed at the executive group level. Implementation of group decisions may often be performed by the core project management group.

### Core Project Management Group

- **Strategic direction and organizational structure:** Key strategic decisions include the designation and membership of cross-functional working groups, milestone planning that organizes the time-based relationships between those groups, and oversight of the workflow sequence planning within each of those groups. When implementing the lean capital project delivery methodology, the pull-planning technique is used for milestone and workflow sequence planning.
- **Team health and alignment:** The group is responsible for understanding how decisions impact relationships among team members are based on trust and in support of mutual goals. Some decisions should address methods for promoting and monitoring team health.
- **Conditions of Satisfaction:** The group is responsible for developing and promoting a project Conditions of Satisfaction document describing a shared understanding of the results describing the successful delivery of the project.
- **Resource allocations:** Project resources, like meeting space arrangements, mock-up requirements, field office logistics, and the provision of offsite staging facilities are the responsibility of this group.
- **Major scope direction:** During design, the cross-functional working groups refine design ideas developed in the early stage of their work. Some design considerations may have a significant impact on some quality of the project, such as aesthetics, function, site logistics, or cost.

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The core project management group has responsibility for making decisions between alternatives in these situations. Defining how the cross-functional working groups distinguish between a major and routine scope direction decision is a responsibility of the core project management group.

- **Regulatory compliance:** The group is responsible for ensuring regulatory compliance during design and construction. Specific compliance tasks are often implemented by functional groups.
- **Planning and coordination systems and processed designation:** The group equips the project team with the systems and standards required to plan and coordinate work. This includes project team training and coaching as required.
- **Continuous adaptation management:** More commonly understood as continuous improvement, the group is responsible for managing practices that help the team improve practices by adapting positively to new knowledge and events.

### Cross-Functional Working Groups

- **Routine scope direction:** During design, a major purpose for the cross-functional composition of the group is to facilitate design decisions that reflect optimal solutions based on building function, aesthetic, constructability, and cost estimating expertise. During construction, unforeseen circumstances may result in additional costs. Usually, additional cost decisions during construction are referred to the core project management group. There may be circumstances in which the cross-functional working group may have discretion to pay for additional construction costs from a contingency fund.
- **Operations coordination:** Weekly and daily coordination is important within and among cross-functional working groups. A weekly coordination review as defined by the Last Planner System® is an effective forum for the weekly coordination among active working groups. Daily coordination is most effectively addressed within each working group.

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### Functional Groups

- **Tool and technology selection:** While there will be project-wide communications protocols and technologies, the appropriate tools and technologies for individual tasks are determined by functional group leaders.
- **Operations leadership and task assignments:** Functional group leaders make specific task assignments to individual team members, including themselves. These tasks inform the work commitments they provide during weekly coordination planning.

### Some Notes About Meetings

Information provided in a meeting is either for decisionmaking or coordination, the two primary purposes for a meeting. Planning and problem-solving are forms of decisionmaking. Coordination meetings are daily and periodic.

- **Daily coordination:** This occurs in short meetings lasting five to fifteen minutes, often called huddles. The multi-layered framework described in this article lends itself to the implementation of tiered daily huddles. In this framework, functional groups meet early in the day to briefly review impacting their weekly work plan and agree upon adjustments to maintain or work back to the target plan. Later in the day, cross-functional working groups have a similar huddle, informed by concerns raised in the previous huddle. This is followed by a huddle with cross-functional working group leaders and at least one member of the core project management group during which high-level concerns requiring core project management group attention are raised.
- **Weekly coordination:** This meeting conventionally includes functional group leads, led by a project manager or superintendent. In the recommended framework, participation shifts to cross-functional working group leaders and at least one representative from the core project management group. Many of these people will happen to be

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functional group leaders. The purpose of this meeting is to align group work plans with the target project lookahead plan, coordinating the details of the daily work for the following week. This includes lookahead preparation through constraint management and a review of key coordination metrics.

- **Owner-Architect-Contractor (OAC) meeting:** Much of the time in these meetings is invested in providing project work updates to people who do not participate in the weekly coordination meeting. This redundancy can be eliminated by core project management group attendance in the weekly coordination meeting and attention to the implementation of visual management practices. OAC meetings lend themselves to addressing many problems and needed decisions, without resolving most of them. This results in “ball-in-court syndrome” wherein someone is assigned an action item, and the issue is kicked into the future. Problem solving and decisionmaking work is better addressed through collaborative small ad hoc working group sessions dedicated to related sets of problems decisions.

### Conclusion

Effective decision-making is crucial for the success of building design and construction projects. By adopting a structured approach to decision-making, teams can ensure clarity, accountability, and collaboration. The multi-tiered framework outlined in this document—comprising the Executive Group, Core Project Management Group, Cross-Functional Working Groups, and Functional Groups—provides a robust foundation for making informed decisions at various levels.

Each group has distinct responsibilities, from strategic direction and resource allocation to routine scope direction and operations leadership. Regular meetings, including daily huddles and weekly coordination sessions, facilitate continuous communication and problem-solving, ensuring that decisions are made promptly and effectively.

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By embracing these decisionmaking engagement approaches, project teams can enhance their performance, foster trust and collaboration, and ultimately deliver successful projects that meet or exceed stakeholder expectations.

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