
The Second Agenda

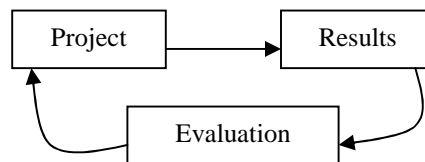
By John Durel

If your organization has recently created a major new service or program, and all you have achieved is a new service or program, then you have missed an opportunity to make important changes in your organization. Even if the service or program has been immensely successful, coming in on time, under budget, and reaching record numbers of constituents—alone it is just a project. What's missing has to do with the whole.

Every major project should have two agendas. The first is to create something of value for your constituents, to produce a service, product or program. The second is to use the project to improve the ways the organization as a whole gets things done.

Traditionally we view projects as undertakings that bring together people with appropriate skills to produce intended results. In the best projects the people function as a team and the objectives are clearly defined. Evaluation is not always done, but when it is it usually seeks to assess how close actual results were to the intended ones. Did the project reach the targeted audience? Did it meet the projected number of participants? Did it come in on time and on budget? Did it achieve its educational objectives? Are the donors happy?

The evaluation is then used to improve the next project. Theoretically, this circular learning system will, over time, produce better results. This is the First Agenda.



The Second Agenda, on the other hand, recognizes that the project operates within a larger context. First, it is constrained by the organization system. For example, if the organization has a strong vertical structure where the executive director makes all decisions, then the project team's decision making will conform to that model. If the organization has a weak financial accounting process, then the team will have difficulty managing its finances.

The organization system includes:

- the organization's leadership and direction
- its structure (horizontal and vertical)
- its staffing (matching the person to the job)
- its methods for coordination, communication and control
- its allocation of resources (people, time, money)
- its rewards and incentives

Each of these has an impact, positive or negative, on the way a project team operates.

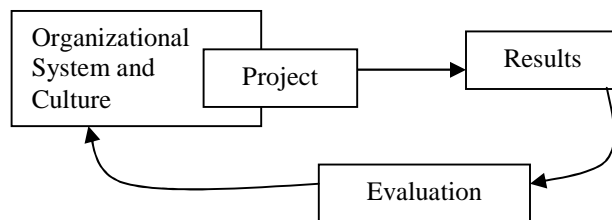
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Both the organization system and the project itself exist within the organization's culture. An organization's culture is the embodiment of its values and beliefs, as expressed in the behavior of its people. An organization may value such things as creativity, accuracy, or timeliness. It may describe itself as optimistic, or pro-active, or well prepared. Each such value shapes the way people in the organization work. Of course, a value can have both a negative and positive influence. An organization that holds expertise in high regard may inadvertently foster turf battles, with each person protecting his or her own area of responsibility. One that values cooperation may actually avoid confronting tough issues. Rarely does an organization spontaneously have just the right combination of synergetic elements in its culture.

The organization's culture creates a frame of values and acceptable behaviors within which the project team operates. The ability of the team to achieve the desired results will be constrained or supported by the kinds of behavior that the culture promotes.

Evaluation in the traditional First Agenda model measures the actual results against the project's stated goals. When a project fails to meet an objective, an explanation often is sought within the project's people. If numbers were not met, then perhaps the marketing person is inept. If the project was late, maybe the team leader does not know how to manage time.

In the Second Agenda model, evaluation goes deeper. It seeks to discover why the project team behaved the way it did. It presumes that it is the organization, not the people, that needs to be fixed. This is not to say that people are never at fault. However, "solving" a problem simply by changing personnel often fails to address the root cause, and the problem may well appear in a future project. Real organizational change seeks less to change people than to change the structure, system, and culture so that the people can meet their potential and do better work.



For example, if a project comes in late, what is there about the structure, system and culture that inhibited the team's speed? Do the organization's procedures for communication and control slow down the work unnecessarily? Does the organization place a high value on timeliness, or do deadlines often slip? Are their rewards for being on time, and consequences for not, or do people receive raises and satisfactory performance reviews regardless? The answer to any of these questions should be followed by a series of "Why?" questions. This takes you deeper into underlying assumptions. You may discover that for this organization, concerns about making the right decision are more important than making a timely decision, so that a solution might be to become better at estimating the time a project will take. The next question would be: why does the organization tend to underestimate the time to do a project? Alternatively, you may discover that the director does not trust the team to make good decisions on its own. Why? Perhaps because there have been problems in the past with other projects. Here a solution might be to become very explicit about the level of decision making the team may do on its own, gradually raising the level as trust builds.

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Organizations can improve their chances of achieving desired results by using tools and teaching in four broad areas:

- Diagnostic tools used by project teams to assess their own performance, focusing not only on what was accomplished but also how;
- Team coaching, especially including the team's ability to assess itself in the context of the whole system;
- Analysis of the entire organization, revealing insight into the organization's culture;
- Project leader training, to heighten awareness of what is really going on and to become change agents for the whole organization.

Seeing what needs to be changed is the first step for making significant improvements throughout the organization. The next step is to use a new project as a pilot or model for performing under new norms and procedures. By self-consciously using project teams to develop and try new ways of doing things, the project becomes a testing ground. Whatever innovations work for the team can subsequently be applied to the whole organization.

This is the essence of the Second Agenda: to use a project to effect change throughout the organization. Organizations often find the resources (personnel, time and money) to produce new services and programs. Rightly so, since this is where they add value for their constituents. On the other hand, rarely do they find sufficient time and money to assess and change their organizational systems and cultures.

The Second Agenda offers a way to do both for the same dollar. By seeing the bigger picture, you can direct your resources to solve more than one problem at a time. The Second Agenda, applied consciously and repeatedly to project after project, will transform your organization. You not only will produce better services and programs, you will build an organization that excels in all areas.