



How to Master the 5 Phases of Successful Project Delivery

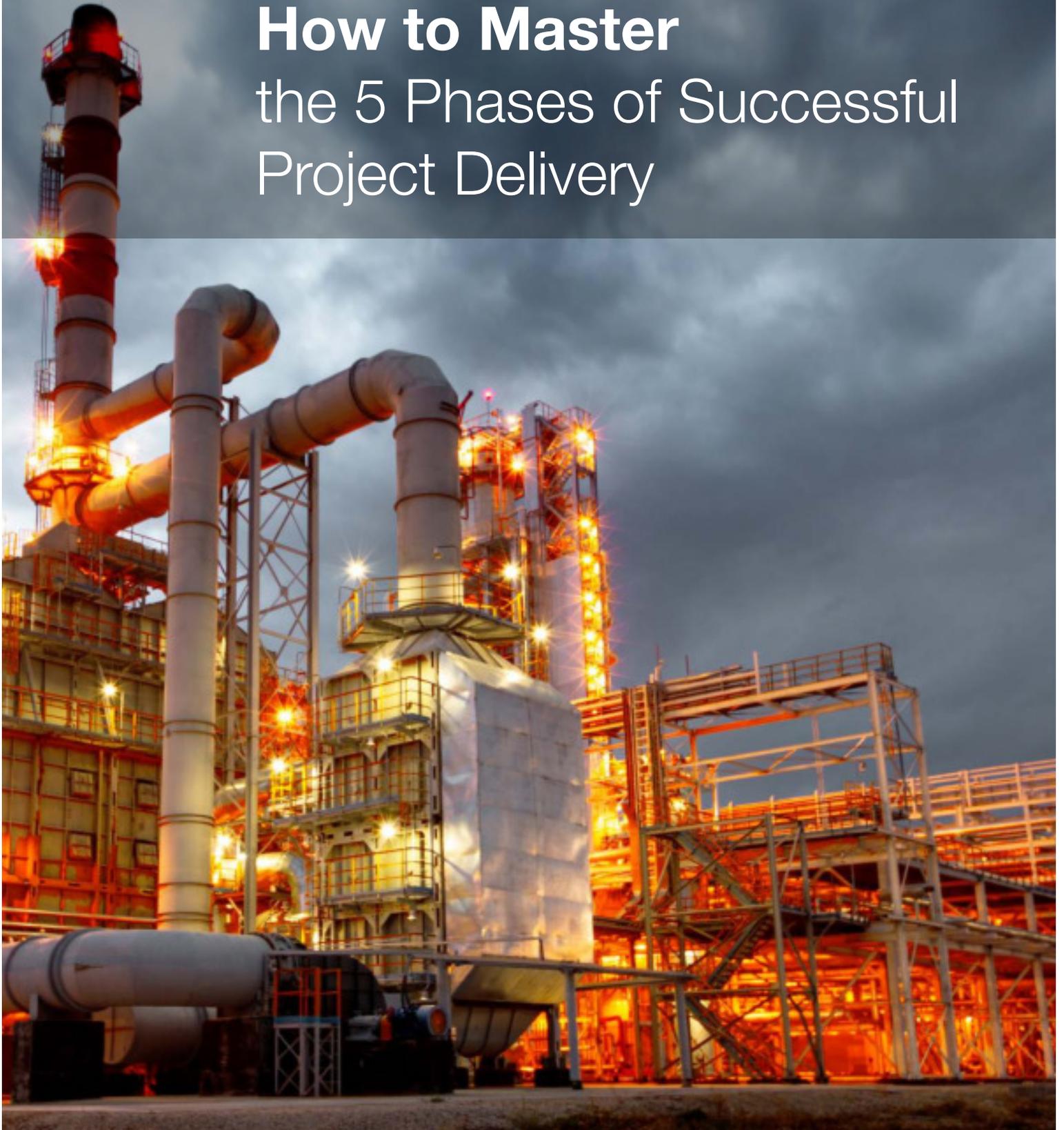


Table of Contents

What to Know _____	1
What to Consider _____	2
Phase 1: Conceive - Get the Game On _____	3
Phase 2: Launch - Do What It Takes _____	4
Phase 3: Accelerate: Hit Your Stride _____	5
Phase 4: Cruise - A Great Place to Visit _____	6
Phase 5: Step Change - Beyond All Limits _____	8
Conclusion: Understand the 5 Developmental Phases and Play to Your Strengths _____	10



How to Master the 5 Phases of Successful Project Delivery

What to Know

Our research shows that the most effective projects naturally develop and evolve through a series of distinct phases. Failing to recognize these transitions as they occur, and failing to provide the leadership and management required to maximize performance in each phase, helps explain why so many projects fall so far short of delivery targets. **In the oil and gas industry specifically, project complexity necessitates an understanding of these phases for the most effectively run projects.**

Consider the analogy of building a fire. It begins with an idea: “Let’s build a fire.” But until you gather the necessary materials and successfully ignite them, it remains merely an idea—a “potential” fire. Once lit, the fire requires a lot of focused effort: fanning flames and adding more materials to burn until you have a steady blaze. At this point, the fire still requires maintenance and vigilance, but not the same level of focus or resources; it has become its own force. We need to interact with it differently during each of the different stages of the fire. If we acted like the fire was sufficiently running at its inception, it might go out.

On the other hand, if we acted as we did when we were first building the fire—fanning it and adding fuel when the fire was already blazing—we would waste considerable time and energy. The same is true of the different stages of every project. Each distinct project phase calls for tinct oversight, engagement, and ultimately, very different actions from the leaders and managers accountable for delivery.

What to Consider

Have you ever wondered why there are times your management style works brilliantly—reliably delivering great projects—and other times it simply doesn't, perhaps even to the point of failure? Of the many explanations offered for huge disparities in project performance, few seem to be consistently actionable.

That's why JMW has developed a new approach to managing projects that's making a real difference with clients—in many cases, helping to turn a predictably poor outcome into a significant success. Our work on some of the world's most complex projects has served as the genesis for this model, the *Five Developmental Phases* of a project.

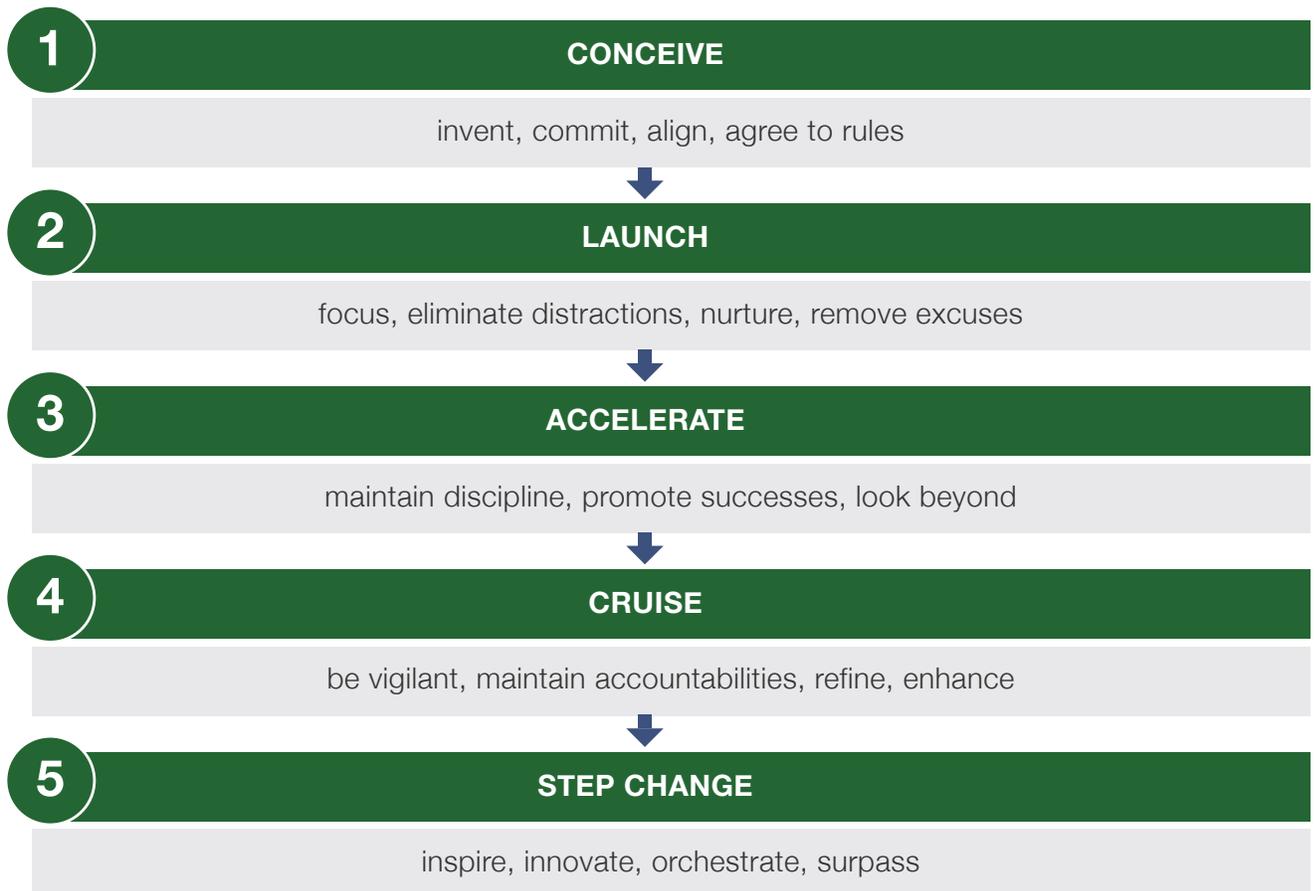


Figure 1: The five developmental phases of projects

Conceive - Get the Game On

Conceive begins when an individual or group generates a shared view of a specific opportunity or objective. This becomes a common framework from which they then establish a set of commitments in order to deliver on the objective. Once this occurs, the game is on.

The most common cause of problems in subsequent project phases results from the insufficient alignment of interests between the parties during this initial phase. This could include the failure to put all concerns and private interests on the table to be addressed, withholding information important to project execution, playing politics, and operating from past-based fixed points of view about other key stakeholders.

Any such “noise” in the background that isn’t handled early on ultimately shows up as distraction and loss of productivity down the line. In almost every struggling project we have been brought in to assist, the team had to revisit the **Conceive** phase to sort out the issues and biases that were not identified, disclosed, and resolved at the outset. At this stage, it’s also important to create and agree upon a set of ground rules for how the team will work together and communicate. A powerful and complete job done during the **Conceive** phase greatly increases the odds of realizing a successful project. The stronger the foundation, the more solid the building.

Main Takeaways

- **Generating a shared view** of an objective that aligns the interests of all parties involved in the project is critical to each of the subsequent stages
- **Lack of alignment, transparency, or collaboration** during the Conceive Phase creates future distractions that jeopardize project success
- **Creating a concrete set of rules** to govern how the project team will communicate and work together is critical during this phase
- **A solid foundation** in Phase 1 greatly increases the odds of project success

Launch - Do What It Takes

As the term suggests, **Launch** is a phase that demands the kind of kinetic energy and focus required to get a payload airborne or move a freight train forward from a standing stop. **It is a big ask for everyone involved—relentless action dedicated to initial and essential outcomes.** Simultaneously, fundamentals must be determined and dealt with such as resources, organization, planning, scope, and preliminary design. When well-executed, this period is short-term, effort-filled, and absolutely necessary. But if **Launch** goes on for too long, it can result in burnout, low morale, and a sense of overwhelm. Issues arise when people are unable to sustain this level of intensity—or on the flip side, if they become entrenched and are unable to switch gears and move on.

As a project manager, your job in the **Launch** phase is to clearly articulate a well-defined list of short-term goals and to bring myopic focus to these goals, eliminating all unnecessary activity and distraction. It's also important to create a work environment where the truth is told about what is *and isn't* getting done.



Defensiveness and finger-pointing can suppress the very information needed to move the project forward in this critical phase.

It may seem counter-intuitive, but **Launch** is also a time for nurturing. Under such continued demand for action, project managers must take extra care with team members, ensuring they have everything they need to succeed. A highly successful project manager we worked with at Boeing offers a good case in point. Every time a member of his team complained they couldn't get something done because of a circumstance, colleague, or contractor, he immediately intervened to rectify the situation. One time, this meant relocating the entire team overnight due to concerns about space. Another time, he removed an IT manager within hours of learning that this individual was standing in the way of delivery. By eliminating every excuse for non-performance, his commitment to his team's success was evident to everyone.

Main Takeaways

- Identify short-term, quick-win goals and achieve them as soon as possible
- Early and often, be candid about where the project is succeeding and moving forward and where it is not
- Nurture team members individually to ensure they have all the necessary resources and direction to accomplish their tasks
- Ask questions about why things aren't getting done and remove roadblocks and/or excuses immediately

PHASE 3

Accelerate: Hit Your Stride

You know you're moving out of **Launch** when some of those things you've been pushing uphill start rolling downhill. For a project team in the **Accelerate** phase, there is the sense of things falling into place and requiring much less effort to produce results. Key deliverables are on track, team members feel productive, and reliable processes are being implemented consistently. There is a buzz in the workplace.



At this stage, it's important not to fall into the trap of easing up. **Instead, maintain discipline and keep doing the things you've relied on to get to this point.** Now is the time to broaden your perspective beyond short-term goals and look farther out into the future. Begin to discuss longer-term challenges and matters that don't require immediate attention, and

leverage people's creativity by stretching their goals and responsibilities. In this phase, managers can now ask the question "How can we up our game?"

A key job for project managers during the **Accelerate** phase is to actively promote all that is being accomplished within and beyond the project team. What is particularly useful to emphasize is what's working—not only the results but what's contributing to the results—people, processes, relationships, quality of thinking, quality of work, collaboration, etc. This new focus requires new awareness. Guard against the habit of devoting too much air time only to what needs fixing.

When well-managed, **Accelerate** allows a project team to cross the threshold into a very exciting next phase—**Cruise**.

Main Takeaways

- **Don't slow down** as things start to fall into place - maintain discipline and pacing
- **Start looking beyond** short-term goals and begin longer-term planning
- **Focus on what is working** more than what is not and share those insights with the team early and often

PHASE 4

Cruise - A Great Place to Visit

Cruise is the phase that many managers yearn for, where established ways of working now reliably and consistently deliver on project commitments. Not only is the project firing on all cylinders, it feels like it has always been. The kinks have been worked out and the team has learned how to effectively deal with and respond to even the most difficult and unexpected obstacles, barriers, and breakdowns. Team members are operating with confidence that goals will be met despite any unforeseen circumstances. A leader's job can now focus on keeping the engine humming and maintaining exceptional diligence with regard to key performance metrics.

In this phase, it's easy for leaders and the team to think they've arrived at the ultimate goal: "Project Nirvana." Managers may assume that when a project gets to this point, its success is now certain. Unfortunately, this is often a costly mistake.

Risks emerge in this phase, just as they do in those that preceded it. Primary pitfalls include:

Boredom

Laxness

Overconfidence

The impact of entropy

As a manager, you must seek out and ward off any gradual decline others might not detect. Continuous improvement remains essential and managers must insist project performance maintains an upward slope. While it may sound extreme, we suggest any downward variance in results should be treated as an urgent matter calling for an immediate remedy.

Once you've got the project ***Cruising***, you have a truly unique opportunity: to turbocharge the performance engine to accomplish results that far exceed anything that could have been imagined at the outset. ***Cruise*** is your platform for ***Step Change***.

Main Takeaways

- **Avoid the temptation** of believing project success is certain and/or imminent just because things are going well
- **Stress continuous improvement** to the team and guard against even the most gradual of declines, immediately addressing them as they arise

Step Change - Beyond All Limits

This remarkable phase relies on leadership even more than those that came before. In major projects, **Step Change** evidences itself in unprecedented advances in time, budget, technology, or all three. One of our most dramatic client breakthroughs was instigated by a mandate from the CEO to deliver a level of ROI which, based on historical data, was simply impossible. Yet the team took on the challenge and committed themselves to that objective. They then proceeded to rewrite the book on how to execute a project—from the financial and contractual relationships between stakeholders to how the team engineered and ultimately constructed the deliverable.

Step Change requires courage. The story cited above began with a project manager committing themselves (and their team) to achieve an objective that was unprecedented by any standard. They put a “stake in the ground” and invited others to follow. Moreover, they inspired the team to see what was in it for them individually and collectively, as well as what was at stake for their company. For them, the challenge was about more than the results. It was about making the impossible goal a game worth playing together.

Inspiration and innovation are the coins of the realm of **Step Change**. **If you are going to stay the course—even when success appears impossible—you’re going to have to inspire and re-inspire people.**

As leaders, it’s important for us to appreciate that innovation and change are necessary to remain competitive in any industry. With this in mind, you can encourage your team to always challenge the limits of what’s considered possible. They should seek innovation, even if at present, things seem to be going well.



Experience suggests you also have to be willing to entertain solutions from the most unlikely of quarters. One colleague reports being present to witness a groundbreaking innovation that resolved most of the key technical issues preventing the completion of a next-generation fuel injection system. This mind-blowing breakthrough came from a junior engineer who had been trying to get more experienced team members to listen for six months. Conventional expertise may not always be your best friend in this project phase.

Effective leadership and management in **Step Change** often look like spontaneous facilitation of interactions among parties who are not accustomed to collaborating, which demands unusual patience, respect, and appreciation. At the same time, one must hold out the possibility of success at all times. More often than not, people ultimately embrace the demands of this phase out of necessity—they recognize the need for new thinking and creative solutions. Even when one's back is against the wall, in this project state, sometimes what leadership looks like is simply being unwilling to give up—refusing to lose the game. This alone can inspire others to stay the course, focusing their energies on what is possible, and what can be done in spite of arguments to the contrary.

Main Takeaways

- **Inspire your team** with bold ideas, goals, or initiatives that may have previously seemed impossible
- **Bring together** unlikely and/or unfamiliar parties for collaboration and to help facilitate new ideas
- **Stay the course and refuse to budge** on your demands for innovation - despite potential arguments and push-back from the team, they will ultimately be forced to focus their energy on what is possible within the confines of what you're asking

CONCLUSION

Understand the 5 Developmental Phases and Play to Your Strengths

At any point in time, various areas of your project may move through the five project phases at different rates and thus, will respond best to different styles of leadership and management. One style never suits all. While it may take some getting used to, it also offers an opportunity for development and delegation. For instance, if you have a manager who is very detail-oriented and closely follows every move that his or her team makes, this might be an ideal candidate to manage the **Launch** phase, where micro-management is appropriate. Conversely, that same management style would likely be counter-productive for a team working in the **Cruise** or **Step Change** phases. The power of this model is that it enables you to adjust the emphasis and focus for your leadership and management to match the project state and vastly improve your effectiveness. You may be surprised at how recognizable these project phases are, once you embrace this orientation. The mysteries of certain tell-tale obstacles or issues may be revealed. Radical inconsistencies in results will make more sense. Take a fresh look at projects you've managed in the past—or better yet, the project you're currently managing—and see if you now have a new perspective. **We think you will.**

About JMW Consultants

JMW is a transformation consultancy empowering leaders to shape the future of their organization. Clients who work with us aren't interested in incremental change, they're looking for a transformation in leadership, culture, performance, and results. For nearly 40 years, we have experience helping 75+ major capital projects in a range of sectors – including oil and gas, mining, and economic infrastructure. We find success in working with engaged leaders that believe their people are the top contributor to organizational achievement. Through applied, people-oriented, and results-focused consulting, leadership development, and coaching we shape ambitious visions into reality.

Have a business challenge that could benefit from another perspective?

Contact JMW to schedule a conversation with one of our expert consultants.

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