

## Empowering the government command centre

An approach to project managing Covid-19  
response interventions for government  
clients in the wake of the recovery phase



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# An approach to project managing Covid-19 response interventions for government clients in the wake of the recovery phase

South Africa has been affected by the COVID-19 pandemic for well over four months now and a programme management office (PMO) has become the operating model used by many organisations to manage their responses. As we transition from higher to lower levels of lockdown regulations, many government departments and entities are bracing for a full return to work. While organisations have used the lockdown to prepare, many will need to adjust their structures and processes to manage and deliver in a COVID-19 world for at least the next 18 months.

While there is a focus on statutory reporting to adjust Annual Performance Plans (APP) and budgets to align to the national re-prioritisation of resources, there is also a need to closely manage the day-to-day developments of the Pandemic in a more adaptive and flexible manner. Government institutions must focus on managing the response to the pandemic as well as the business of government. In this article we focus on the former, taking into account the nuances that will be required as different districts may follow different alert levels over the next few months and how that may inform institutions' responses.

Some of the learnings from programmes leading the initial responses to COVID-19 include:

- Focus on delivery while planning
- Create space for managing both day-to-day and medium-term needs
- Understand the key linkages being impacted by the Pandemic
- Create seamless connection from decision to delivery to enhance congruency
- Maintain a balance between public health response, social welfare support, and economic insulation and recovery
- Build functional interfaces with key stakeholders to reinforce co-operation and facilitate issue resolution
- Avoid duplicating effort, leverage work that exists both Globally and Nationally
- Build long-term internal capability to enhance the sustainability of the response.

It has become apparent from many experiences that a fast-paced learning and improvement process must be at the very centre of the response, given the uncertainty that exists along with the need to continuously process new information and the dynamics thereof to adjust plans and implementation.

The concept of a rolling plan often used by managerial accountants could be a useful approach. At Southwest airlines, an American-based leading airlines company, planning takes place at the front line. It is a continuous process based on 12-month rolling forecasts and quarterly plans within a clear strategic framework. Resources are made available monthly and quarterly based on these forecasts, meaning that action plans can be approved at any time through the year and implemented immediately. Targets are set by each team within broad-based parameters and expectations. This enables innovative thinking and builds ownership and commitment at a local level. See figure 1 for application to COVID-19.

Therefore, some of the design principles that government departments should consider include:

- **Two team approach:** Allow teams to work in parallel, with one team focusing on responding to the immediate needs of the pandemic while the 2nd team focuses on the planning and preparation required to respond to the pandemic in the next 3-6 months
- **Natural evolution:** The PMO and the workstreams will evolve as requirements change and some structures may need to be added, transferred or omitted

- **Backup team:** There will be dedicated capacity for a "shadow team/member" to take over should members of the team fall ill to give them sufficient time to recover and ensure that there is continuity of delivery
- **Financial Agility:** There will be an openness to making required adjustments to financial processes and existing resource allocations to ensure that resources are unlocked and optimally utilised
- **Bias for action:** The primary occupation will be to execute on decisions taken and minimise the administrative burden on getting the job done
- **Transparency and collaboration:** There will be a culture of information sharing and working together to solve the many problem that will arise. Using technology as an enabler.

These principles will inform the governance, processes and structures of the PMO and form the foundations for adaptive governance required in crisis and for institutions in the future. It is important that these align to our constitutional framework to uphold our values as a country.

Some of the key capabilities any programme response should consider incorporating to manage the overall response in a more organised and structured manner are detailed. These capabilities can be leveraged by the multitude of work streams and task teams enabling them to focus on delivery at the frontlines.

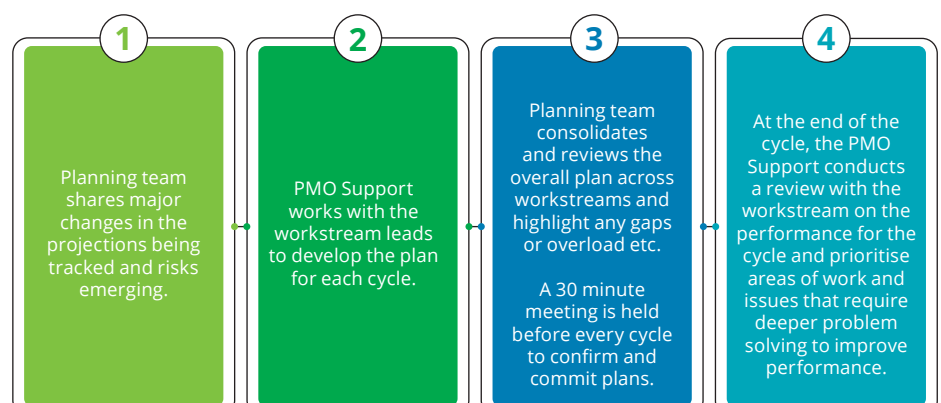


Figure 1: Rolling Plans Process

## Key capabilities

**Planning** requires a high-level overview of the activities of the PMO to monitor and anticipate any further complications to the COVID-19 situation. This includes effective reporting in progress and performance in all areas including health, transport, communication, economic and social welfare. It is essential to keep records of incidents, risks and improvements for good practice and knowledge sharing practices that can lead to more effective solutions.

**Delivery management** focuses on ensuring that delivery that is planned is executed and this is supported through both progress reporting and performance reporting. It will also include the management of incidents as they occur and the prevention of future incidents. This is supported by adequate problem solving to address the key challenges impacting performance. There may be some cases that require legal counsel to address disputes and queries during delivery over and above the policy directives set out.

**Delivery assurance** focuses on ensuring effective and transparent reporting of progress and performance in all workstreams. It is thus essential to keep records of incidents, risks and issues that might arise, as well as performing adhering assurance and implementing controls for operational excellence.

**Resource management** focuses on financial, material and human resources to meet the demands as a consequence of COVID-19. The PMO needs to be fast and effective in managing, onboarding and deploying resources. This includes forecasting future needs, demands and partnering with suppliers that are able to fulfil these demands in a timely and quality manner. The supply chain has to continue to meet the demands, be reliable and must be agile and flexible for this disruptive environment. The PMO can identify gaps where stakeholders can assist and play a positive role in the life of the Programme.

**Communication** with stakeholders and other relevant personnel is critical to avoid panic and misinformation from spreading. The PMO must align and create a Communications approach that will be critical in determining when, what and how messages are communicated. Information needs to be readily available including a FAQ section that will relieve some of the pressure on hotline centres. Identifying and engaging stakeholders will fill in important skill gaps and support in driving PMO actions ahead. The effectiveness of the comms approach must be tracked and adjusted to ensure it is accessible to all citizens.

**ICT support** will enable a virtual PMO that will enable teams to work safely and effectively from wherever they are based. The VPMO must be reliable and safe when it comes to sharing information and maintaining the integrity thereof. Simple and effective tools to facilitate collaborative work, enhanced co-ordination and transparency should be available. Most importantly, team members should be upskilled to ensure effective use of the tools.

Each organisation may need to consider different models of organising these capabilities and how they serve the workstreams/task team most effectively. It will be important to consider the required governance structures and reporting cadences to enable an effective operation – minimising bureaucracy and maintaining the integrity of all efforts made.

This is a challenging time for many state institutions, but it creates a great opportunity to reset the pace of delivery and work towards a more adaptive government.

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