

# Building High-Performance Project Talent—A Transformational Initiative



Défense nationale  
National Defence

Through a focus on talent, culture and process, the Canadian Department of National Defence's Project Manager Competency Development Framework helps drive successful outcomes.

In an effort to develop strong, effective project managers, the Canadian Department of National Defence (DND) has created and implemented a comprehensive and robust program that aims to effectively develop and formally qualify all project managers to position the organization for ongoing project management success.

The DND's Project Manager Competency Development (PMCD) framework was developed by a small, forward-thinking group of individuals within the department. They recognized the need to develop DND's project management talent as well as more effectively match project managers' competencies with the level of project complexity.

Through its efforts, the DND has made an investment to ensure that project management becomes a core competency that drives successful project outcomes. The PMCD framework's ability to align project manager competencies with project complexities will continue to play a critical role in meeting the strategic objectives of the Federal Government's major equipment recapitalization program for the Canadian Armed Forces and perhaps become a model of excellence for successful project management throughout the entire government.

## A Case for Change

After the Federal Government launched the recapitalization program, DND officials identified a critical need for a competency framework for its project managers.

The goal of the recapitalization program was to transform the vision of a first-class, modern military into an active and comprehensive, 20-year CAD\$50 billion plan. The strategy included a five-fold increase in capital spending, which encompassed equipment, infrastructure and information management, with funding for approximately 300 projects, ranging from CAD\$5 million – \$24 billion.

At the time, the DND offered project management training focused on PMI's *A Guide to the Project Management Body of Knowledge (PMBOK® Guide)*, but had not yet established formal professional development requirements for project managers. This resulted in the ad hoc selection of project managers—many of whom were experienced DND engineers with little or no formal project management training.

“Prior to 2007, DND did not look at a project manager from the perspective of experience and competence, so there was no rolling together of knowledge and experience in a formal program or process that properly qualified an individual to be a project manager,” stated Eric Bramwell, Director of the Project Management Support Organization (PMSO) in DND’s Materiel Group, who was deeply involved with the development of the PMCD.

“Combine that with reduced talent after significant attrition occurred in response to a program review, in the 1990s, plus a demographic causing significant retirement, and the experience base had become less than it needed to be. We definitely knew we had to fix the talent gap,” said Mr. Bramwell.

## **Treasury Board Secretariat Introduces Project Complexity and Risk Assessment (PCRA) Model**

In 2007, as the DND was recognizing the need to professionalize its project managers, the Treasury Board Secretariat (TBS) issued a new management policy with a comprehensive system for rating government projects. This system, known as the Project Complexity and Risk Assessment (PCRA) model, was based on the degree of project complexity and risk.

The idea of the PCRA was that projects would be evaluated throughout their life cycle and assigned a score based on: the type of project; its complexity and cost; technology required; number of people involved; procurement issues; and other criteria.

“DND’s PMCD dovetailed nicely with this new policy and the shift in how the government would assess and approve projects,” said Mr. Bramwell. “Before PCRA was developed, the largest determining factor for approving or assessing projects was almost solely the project’s budget.”

## **Other Jurisdictions Committed to Project Management Training**

Another factor leading to the creation of the PMCD was that other countries, such as the United States, the United Kingdom and Australia, had formalized their own project management training programs. Therefore, models were available to use as a foundation for DND requirements. Also, public scrutiny of government expenditures was increasing, along with media attention on the DND. Given the level of public funds being spent on defence, it was considered both responsible and appropriate that adequate measures be taken to mitigate project risk.

Ian Mack, Director General, Major Project Delivery, Sea (Chief of Staff of the Materiel Group when the DND PMCD framework was conceived), whose efforts laid the groundwork for the PMCD, said that he was inspired after hearing a 2006 lecture by an Australian official on his organization’s project management competency standard.

“I realized that the Australians were light years ahead of us in terms of establishing a competency set of profiles to be used to develop and qualify project managers against a project complexity assessment system,” Director General Mack said. By pursuing a similar path, DND could train and assign more experienced project managers to more complex projects, and newer project managers to smaller, less complex projects where they could gain more experience.

In early 2007, a small group of motivated individuals engaged senior leadership, secured their support, and initiated a pilot project for the DND PMCD framework. This group—including members from the Materiel, Information Management, and Infrastructure and Environment Groups within DND—set out to create a comprehensive, integrated learning and development framework. This framework was designed to train and qualify project managers to successfully manage projects of increasing size, risk and complexity.

The PMCD program was formally implemented at DND in 2013, with the intent to match project managers to projects—in essence, to align their skills and experience with project complexity.

### **DND's Path to Success: The Need for Executive Sponsorship**

Research has shown that the top driver of project and program success is having an actively engaged executive sponsor (see sidebar on page 4). Fortunately, Director General Mack recognized the importance of having support from senior executives within the department. This would prove crucial to the PMCD's eventual creation and success.

Mr. Mack found his influential sponsor in Dan Ross—at the time, Assistant Deputy Minister (ADM), Materiel Group—who quickly accepted his vision.

Mr. Mack presented some key concepts that would shape the PMCD:

- The idea of “project management champions,” who advocate for the use of good practices throughout the organization.
- The organization of a small team dedicated to implementing the change.
- Organization of three fully institutionalized project management seminars per year.
- Alignment of project managers with projects based on their competencies and a project's complexity.

“We continually provided ADM Ross with information on what our counterparts around the world were doing. And we continued to brief and build support from other senior executives involved in the decision making process within DND,” said Mr. Mack.

The DND Materiel Group also understood the importance of having many people who support its goals. This led the team to broaden support for the PMCD framework outside of the Materiel Group and include the Information Management and Infrastructure and Environment groups.

Patrick Finn, the current Assistant Deputy Minister (Materiel Group), agreed, acknowledging that having executive buy-in was critical to the success of launching the PMCD. “While Canada's recapitalization program was most certainly a call to action to ensure the most effective, efficient project management moving forward, it was the strong leadership of Ian Mack and Dan Ross that really moved it forward,” noted Mr. Finn.

### **PMCD Objectives**

The PMCD has four primary objectives. It seeks to establish:

1. A framework for competency-based management, as adopted by the Canadian government.
2. A link between project management competencies and project complexity and risk.
3. A standard for project manager competency.
4. A program to generate and maintain project managers qualified at accepted competency levels.

Executive support for the PMCD has remained throughout the entire process toward implementation, even as new executives moved into roles held by original champions. Communication that promoted the value of professionalizing the DND's project managers has been an ongoing exercise.

### The Importance of Executive Sponsorship

Executive sponsorship played an important role in the creation of the PMCD framework. Ian Mack found his executive sponsor in Assistant Deputy Minister Dan Ross, whose support opened doors across the organization and whose leadership helped drive the program to success.

PMI's research reinforces the importance of actively engaged executive sponsors. The report, *Pulse of the Profession® In-Depth Report: Executive Sponsor Engagement—Top Driver of Project and Program Success*, published in October 2014, states that having an actively engaged sponsor is the main reason projects succeed.

The report—which was based on a survey of over 1,100 project management professionals and executives—found that the most important skills for an executive sponsor are:

- The ability to influence stakeholders;
- The ability to work across different stakeholder groups to find win-win solutions;
- Leadership;
- Decision making; and
- Effective communications.

The survey found that organizations where sponsors frequently demonstrate all five of those skills experience better project performance.

### Understanding the Value of Project Management

When the DND decided to move forward with its PMCD framework in 2007, it recognized that it was critical to align the competencies of its project managers—both seasoned and new—with the complexities of the projects in the recapitalization program.

Equally important, DND's development of its PMCD framework encompassed three basic, yet critically important principles that would guide the entire process forward:

- **Culture:** High-performing organizations fully understand the value of project management and are creating a project management mindset.
- **Talent:** High-performing organizations are significantly more likely to focus on talent management, establishing ongoing training, and formal, effective knowledge transfer. This is especially important in project management, where technical skills are enhanced by the leadership and strategic and business management capabilities that are nurtured through experience.
- **Process:** High-performing organizations support project, program and portfolio management through standardized practices and by aligning projects and programs to the organization's strategy.

"More often than not, organizations make the mistake of taking a limited view of project management and underestimate it as a core, strategic competency," noted Mr. Finn. He and others at DND were mindful of having a strong project management culture within the organization—a culture that recognized the importance of managing and training its talent while at the same time aligning the management of projects with the strategic initiatives of the organization.

Tony Hoe, Director General, Information Management Project Delivery in the Information Management Group, immediately recognized the value of the PMCD framework. In his view, it was not about being better at schedule management or costing of projects—it was about doing better business, which meant aligning project managers to better suit the strategic initiatives and outcomes of the organization.

“Part of having a good employer/employee relationship is having that career path and training and having the human resource function that recognizes the value of talent management—including defined career paths for project managers,” stated Mr. Hoe. “The PMCD framework enables our staff to better deliver business solutions. It’s about upping the game and obtaining a core capability as an organization to effectively manage complex projects.”

Senior DND officials involved in the development of the PMCD insisted that the framework should reach beyond the project management fundamentals of time, cost and scope and include a focus on managing risk, complexity and stakeholders. As a result, the PMCD framework provides DND project managers with the tools to handle complex projects effectively, rather than learning on the job.

Both Mr. Finn and Mr. Mack noted that DND is now operating in a more anticipatory manner than simply reacting to outside conditions and requests.

“We are professionalizing project management because it is a strategic skill and we are aligning the competencies of our project managers with the complexity of the projects being managed. There are no more accidental project managers assigned to tough projects within the Materiel Group,” stated Mr. Mack. “We have a responsibility to the taxpayers to manage projects properly from the beginning, not just learn as we go. The PMCD enables us to do that.”

Moreover, Mr. Finn acknowledges that there will still be problems with the projects being managed but says that the PMCD has better developed project managers to manage the issues. “It would be too costly to not prepare our project managers,” added Mr. Finn. “As a result, we are in a better place moving into the future.”

## Creating the Next Generation of Skilled Project Managers

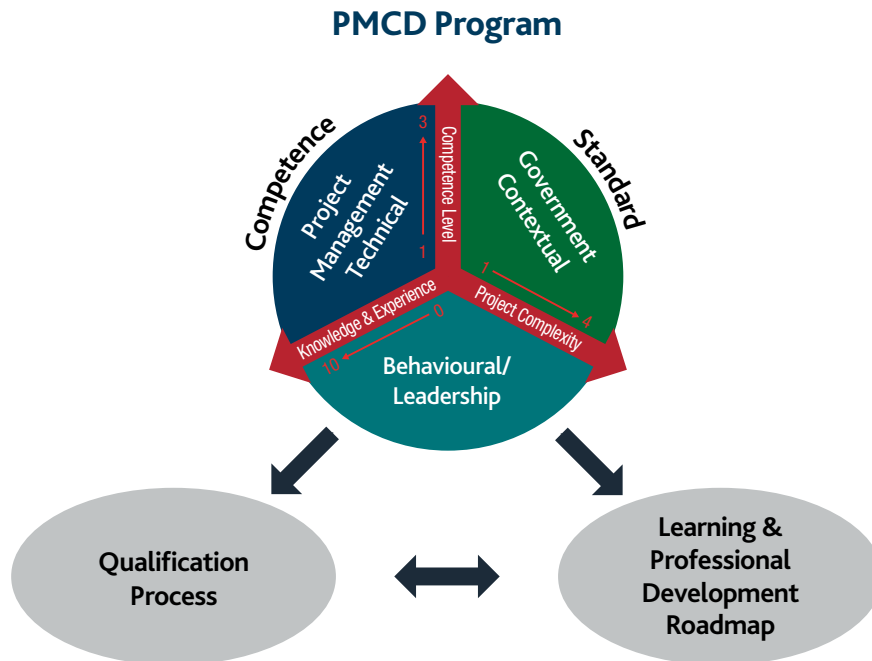
Building high-performance, competent project talent requires a process that ensures employees have the technical skills they need for effective project management, as well as leadership, and strategic and business management acumen required to get the job done. In grooming the next generation of project managers, DND recognized the imperative of equipping its people to excel within a shifting project paradigm. While the original project management triple constraint is marked by time, cost and scope, DND’s PMCD framework focuses on a talent triangle of skills that includes:

- Technical (project management)
- Leadership (behavioural)
- Contextual (government/DND knowledge)

“The world has ceased to be linear from a project management point of view,” said Mr. Mack. “Tangible technical skills—as well as intangible leadership skills—are now equally important in ensuring project success. This is due in part to the explosion in unforeseeable risks that characterize the interconnectedness of the global marketplace, combined with the critical horizontal integration needed within the Government of Canada to manage complex endeavors.”

The DND Materiel team also recognizes the importance of stakeholder management where, increasingly, government projects cross over multiple departments and involve many public and private sector stakeholders.

Doug Baker, a DND PMCD Level-3 project manager also involved in developing the PMCD, said, “The stakeholder issues that we deal with have become broader and deeper. A greater level of informed governance oversight is necessary because of the increased risk and complexity, as well as the sheer volume of projects we handle.”



The PMCD framework

## PMCD's Alignment with PMI's PMCDF

In late 2013, at the request of DND, PMI conducted a “crosswalk” analysis of the PMCD framework against PMI’s Project Manager Competency Development Framework (PMCDF). The objective was to review the newly-implemented PMCD and assess its alignment with the *PMBOK® Guide* standard, as well as compare and assess the PMCD credentials to the globally recognized Project Management Professional (PMP)® certification.

PMI concluded that there is good alignment between its PMCDF and the DND Standard for Project Manager Competencies, and an even match between the concepts of personal competence as described by PMI and the concepts found in the DND’s behavioural competencies. The DND’s PMCD leadership and behavioural component ensures focus in the following key areas connected to leadership:

- Values and ethics
- Strategic thinking
- Engagement
- Management excellence

- Action management
- People management
- Financial management

PMI also commented in its report that the DND's effort "in ensuring a high level of competencies for project managers, and in furthering the professionalization of the project management profession is to be commended."

## **DND's PMCD Embodies 2015 Report by Prime Minister's Advisory Committee on the Public Service**

In 2006, the Prime Minister's Advisory Committee on the Public Service was established to give advice to the Prime Minister and the Clerk of the Privy Council on the renewal of the Public Service. The committee's objective is to help shape the Public Service into an institution geared to excellence, distinguished by highly-engaged and highly-skilled people performing critical tasks with professionalism and efficiency.

In its Ninth Annual report, released in March 2015, the Advisory Committee, co-chaired by former Senator, the Honourable Hugh Segal, and Rick Waugh, former CEO of Scotiabank, specifically identified the importance of making process improvements, including the introduction of modern project management techniques, as one of the four major elements on its agenda.

The Advisory Committee Report stated, "To do what Canadians need and expect of them, public servants require modern tools and modern skills. Most importantly, they need talented managers and management structures that will equip and empower them to do their jobs effectively..."<sup>1</sup>

Furthermore, the Advisory Committee's report noted a number of observations in areas including: attracting, retaining and developing better talent; better measuring performance and results; and continuing to demonstrate agility and responsiveness in the face of ever-increasing complexity.

"It is encouraging to see how the DND PMCD directly encompasses these important observations and recommendations raised within the Prime Minister's Advisory Committee's report," noted Mr. Bramwell. "We were also pleased to see how closely aligned our PMCD was with one of the major elements on the Committee's agenda—that being 'Operational pace and the effective implementation of government decisions, including reducing cycle time and introducing modern project management techniques.'"

## **DND's Culture of Project Management**

The DND journey toward establishing a robust framework for its project manager competency development included innovative thinking and initiatives resulting in:

- A committed and fully trained team of professional project managers.
- An energized project management community supported by all levels of management.
- Accountable project managers and executives committed to showing greater organizational value through successful projects, while delivering on the promise and execution of Canada's military recapitalization program.

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<sup>1</sup> Prime Minister's Advisory Committee on the Public Service, Ninth Annual Report, March 2015, page i

Though it is early to measure the overall impact of the PMCD framework, the cultural transformation embracing project management throughout the organization demonstrates commitment to the principles of project management at the highest level.

“We’ve got a lot of work to do yet, but I do see us—our project managers—more engaged, sharing more, doing things right and with a greater understanding of the relationships, the stakeholders, the intangibles, the behaviours. Those are the things that we need our project managers to handle,” stated Mr. Bramwell.

Mr. Finn agreed, stating, “By professionalizing project management through our PMCD framework, we have elevated the view of what project managers do within this important competency.”

“It is exciting to note the progress we have made in advancing the professional development of our project management teams, which is so necessary for the successful delivery of the recapitalization program,” said John Turner, Associate Deputy Minister in the Canadian Department of National Defence. “The PMCD framework is now well underway. It is a key component of our goal to optimize our project delivery success and increase the professionalization of our people.”