

Sharing lessons from successful Reef project design and delivery

The Management Synthesis for Reef Programs project recognises that good project design and delivery is as important to achieving long-term outcomes for the Reef as quality science.

The challenge facing future Reef project managers is to ensure that projects are designed to be fit-for-purpose to each individual context and situation, and delivered effectively and efficiently to ensure maximum impact. To assist project managers working in the Reef region, the Office of the Great Barrier Reef has engaged Alluvium to collate the management lessons and experiences captured from recent programs and projects aimed specifically at improving Reef water quality.

The Management Synthesis for Reef Programs project has demonstrated that by understanding and documenting the management factors that contribute most significantly to overall project success, we can enable current and future project managers to adopt and adapt lessons relevant to their context that are based on real life experiences. Importantly it will:

- help minimise avoidable disruptions and delays in project design and delivery, so that we can
- enhance our investment in planning, design and management of projects that address complex or wicked problems, ensuring we can
- achieve optimum project outcomes and a legacy from water quality improvement projects.

The Framework for Reef Project Design and Delivery (see Figure 1. below) incorporates three overarching outcomes found to be present, in some form, in all successful projects investigated as part of this study.

The outcomes recognise the importance of:

- creating a strong foundation
- maintaining an inclusive and collaborative enabling environment
- facilitating transformative change to create a legacy.

The ten management principles for successful design and delivery of Reef programs and projects are considered to be broadly relevant to all Reef project, program and policy contexts.

Each principle encompasses a cluster of unique success factors. The success factors are substantiated with evidence and may not be equally relevant or applicable to all project and program contexts. Evidence has been sourced primarily from stakeholder interviews and focus groups and supplemented with information from a review of project documentation and literature. An Expert Advisory Panel has also helped to guide project direction.

The Management Synthesis for Reef Programs is a key deliverable of the Reef 2050 Water Quality Improvement Plan. The project is funded through the Queensland Government's Reef Water Quality Program and is supported by the Australian Department of Agriculture, Water and the Environment.

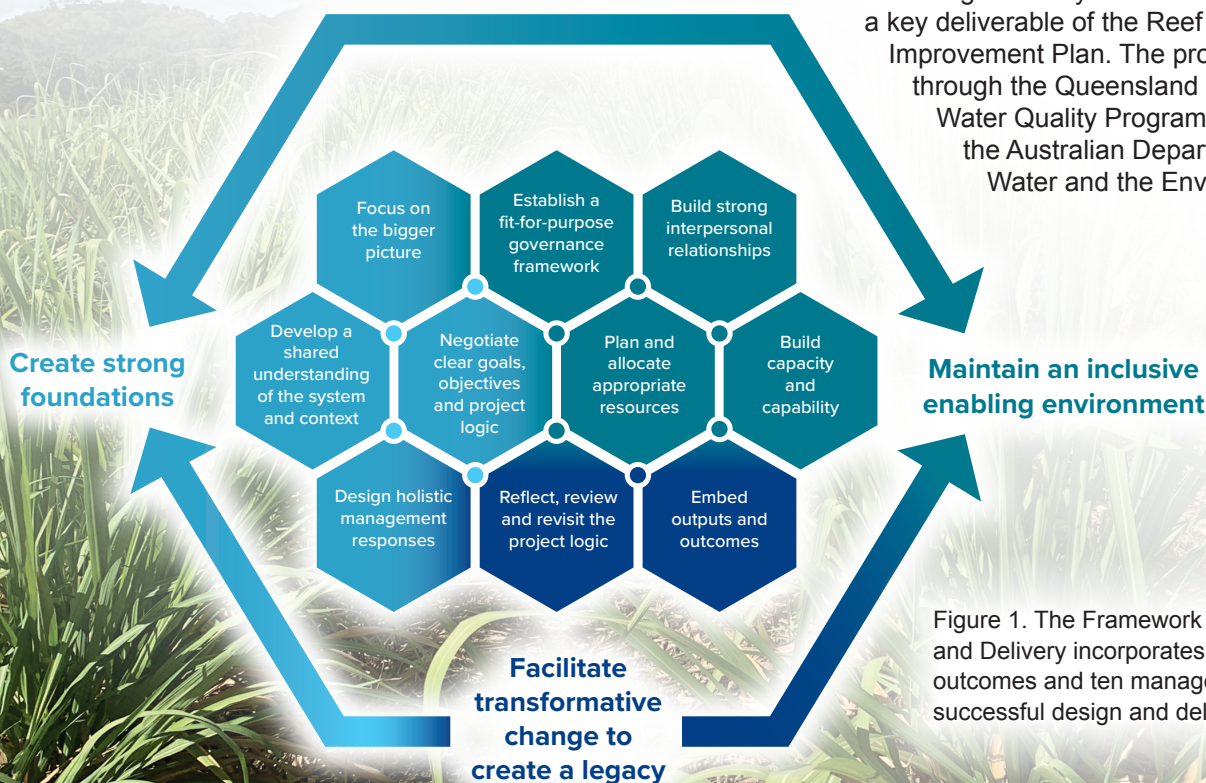


Figure 1. The Framework for Reef Project Design and Delivery incorporates three overarching outcomes and ten management principles for successful design and delivery.

Sharing lessons from successful Reef project design and delivery

Summary of management principles for successful Reef project and program delivery

Create strong foundations

Develop a shared understanding of the system and context

Reef water quality management projects occur in a complex environment with multiple contextual factors and stakeholders to consider. Developing a solid foundational understanding of the system and context is critical for accurately defining the problem, understanding the risks, forming clear goals, objectives and developing an effective method for how to address the problem.

Projects that developed a shared understanding of the system and context looked at the situation from multiple perspectives (i.e. the scientific perspective, the policy perspective, the landholder's perspective, the environmental perspective, etc.). They were successful because there was a common understanding of 'the problem' among stakeholders who negotiated solutions to maximise benefits (i.e. identifying win-win outcomes and/or co-benefits), and negotiated the most effective method to reach goals and objectives. Successful projects purposefully included multiple stakeholders in this process, using participatory and collaborative approaches that varied according to project context.

Negotiate clear goals, objectives and project logic

Projects need to have clear goals, objectives and a logical approach for how they are going to achieve these. Projects that did this successfully identified clear goals, objectives and a project logic based on a system understanding (see above), rather than responding directly to investment priorities which can result in a disconnect between the high level strategy and what is happening on the ground.

They have clear goals and objectives that allow for a clear line of sight to plan and implement the project without the goalposts changing but are also open to adaptive management if something isn't working or could be improved.

Focus on the bigger picture

Projects are always limited in the outcomes that can be achieved within the project timeframe and budget. It can be tempting to think about a project in isolation, working only to achieve its own goals and outcomes. But to have a meaningful impact on the Reef, the environment and the community, current and future projects need to be working in synchronisation to establish foundations and collectively build towards long-term outcomes.



Successful projects are thoughtful about how they are contributing to something bigger and beyond their own lifespan, purposefully setting up the project to facilitate continual advancement towards a long-term goal.

Design holistic management responses

Reef water quality projects operate in a complex environment and trying to create change can be a challenge when many factors are interrelated or co-dependent.

Successful projects acknowledged this complexity and design management responses that are holistic, considering all parts of a system.

Holistic management responses resulted in more successful projects that created long-term sustainable outcomes.

Sharing lessons from successful Reef project design and delivery

Summary of management principles for successful Reef project and program delivery (continued)

Maintain an inclusive enabling environment

Build the 'right' team and allocate appropriate resources

Successful projects are driven by dedicated team members with the appropriate skills, capacity and resources. Identifying these skills and recruiting the 'right' team members for the life of the project can be challenging and requires foresight.

Successful project teams work well together, often requiring diverse and complementary skills and expertise.

Establish a fit for purpose governance framework

While projects may explore their specific policy and governance system while developing their system understanding, appropriate governance systems also need to operate at a project scale. Fit for purpose governance frameworks and clear project protocols were shown to underpin multiple success factors such as:

- establishing clear roles, responsibility, expectations and accountability among partners, contractors and stakeholders
- co-ordination and alignment between multiple organisations, departments, levels of government and policy areas
- sustaining participatory processes throughout the life of the project
- establishing clear processes and expectations for data collection, data representativeness, management and sharing upfront.

Build strong interpersonal relationships

Strong interpersonal relationships built on trust have been shown to underpin the success of projects. But getting the conditions right to facilitate the development of strong interpersonal relationships over time, or within the life of a project, can be challenging.

Successful projects were considerate of the timeframes required to build relationships, setting up the right foundations, and the behaviours and attitudes that can promote or break strong interpersonal relationships.

Build capacity and capability

Building the capacity and capability of stakeholders maximises the potential for positive change with sustained outcomes.

Successful projects were strategic about providing the 'right' information and support to build capacity and capability. Successful projects thought about the key audience they were working with and provided a variety of opportunities for learning that catered to different learning styles.

For projects working with landholders, successful projects provided information that landholders could easily relate to and understand such as through peer-to-peer learning or tailored agronomic extension.





Facilitate transformative change to create a legacy

Reflect, review and revisit the project logic

There is not always a silver bullet when it comes to Reef water quality projects; things don't always go exactly as planned, new aspects emerge, and assumptions are made and realised. The only way to manage these situations is to continually reflect, review and revisit the project logic in order to be adaptive.

Successful projects pre-anticipated this and set in place systems or procedures to support ongoing adaptive management. While the development of project logics and Monitoring, Evaluation, Reporting and Improvement (MERI) plans are becoming more common, it is still a challenge to use these as a tool to drive continual improvement.

Embed outputs and outcomes

Projects do not always stop when the money runs out. There are important roles and responsibilities for ensuring project outputs and outcomes are not only shared but influence other Reef outcomes. This principle refers to some of the key success factors that have allowed Reef projects to embed outputs and outcomes and create a legacy that links back to the bigger picture.

While this management principle appears to relate to an activity that happens at the end of a project, it is critical that the needs and intended use/users of any information, outputs or outcomes are identified early on.

The Framework for Reef Project Design and Delivery can be used by a variety of audiences including:

1. **Investment portfolio and program managers** during both the project application and assessment phases.
2. **Current, prospective and future program and project managers** to source relevant information on project management principles.
3. **Program and project evaluators** to acknowledge and continually build an understanding of the linkages between management principles and project outcomes.
4. **Policy developers** to review existing policy and develop new policy and planning instruments that takes into consideration management principles.
5. **Academia and management researchers** to utilise this information as a benchmark and starting place to test and refine management principles.

The Management Synthesis for Reef Programs has brought to light important insight and knowledge of Reef project managers gained over many years of implementation and will continue to inform Reef outcomes into the future.