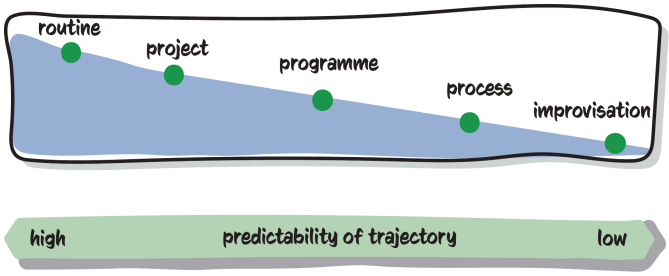
Exploring issues with a process-oriented approach

Background and step-by-step plan for an exploratory process

A project starts with a clear result. You know *what* you are going to deliver, and the art is to achieve that as smartly as possible: planning, dividing tasks, managing risks, steering on time and money.

But by no means every assignment starts that way. Sometimes there is only an uneasy feeling that things need to change. A complaint that keeps coming back. An ambition that has not yet become concrete anywhere. Or five people involved who each have a different picture of “the problem”. In short, the assignment is still far too unpredictable to turn into a project.



Starting a project anyway at such moments is like planning a route without a destination. You will arrive somewhere, just not where anyone wanted to be. Instead, we recommend a process-oriented approach.

WHAT IS PROCESS-ORIENTED WORKING?

In process-oriented working, the result is not yet fixed. You know roughly which direction you want to go in, but *what* exactly it will become emerges along the way – in the interaction between the people involved.

So you do not steer by content, but by process: who has a say in what, in what order, based on what information, and how we reach a decision. The content belongs to the participants too; you, as a facilitating project manager, organise the route to it.

That asks something different of you than project-based working:

	PROJECT-BASED WORKING	PROCESS-ORIENTED WORKING
Result	Fixed in advance	Emerges along the way
Steering by	Time, money, quality, scope	Involvement, dialogue, decision making
Your role	Achieving what has been agreed	Making sure the conversation goes well
Success is	The agreed result, on time	A choice with broad support that people stand behind
Planning	Activities and milestones	Steps, rounds and decision points

Both approaches are good. The mistake is usually in the timing: starting to work in a project-based way while you do not yet know *what* you need to make.

THE EXPLORATION: PROCESS-ORIENTED WORKING IN ITS MOST PRACTICAL FORM

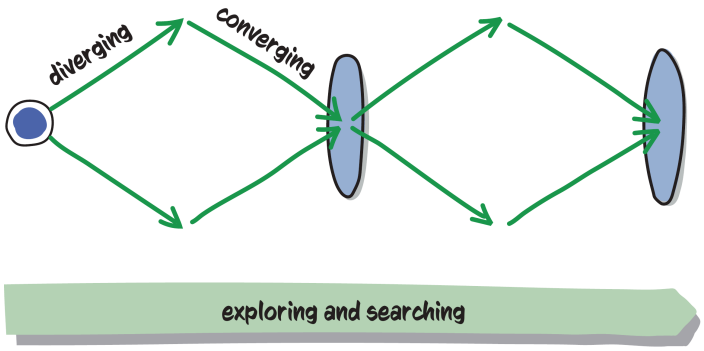
The exploration is the most common process-oriented approach – and often the best first step with a vague issue.

An exploration answers three questions:

1. **What is actually going on here?** What is the issue behind the question, and who has an interest in it?
2. **What directions are there?** Which realistic options are on the table, with what consequences?
3. **What is the logical next step?** Will this become a project, something else, or nothing?

Note that "or nothing" is a fully valid outcome. An exploration that ends with "we should not do this now" is not a failure but a saving.

Questions 1 and 2 address the divergent side of the exploratory process. Step 3 fills in the convergent side and leads to a concrete deliverable: in many cases, an advisory or decision memo. With it, the sponsor can decide which logical next step should be taken. Quite often, this way of working is repeated a number of times.



FROM EXPLORATION TO PROJECT

Does your sponsor choose a direction? Then suddenly you *do* have a result. And so you can switch to a project-based approach: definition phase, Project Startup, project contract.

The nice thing is that the definition phase then goes much faster. You know the playing field, you have spoken to the stakeholders, and the main questions have already been asked. You get most of the time you put into the exploration back here.

FOUR PITFALLS

- **The exploration without an end date.** Exploring is fun. *Too* much fun. Put a date on it.
- **The exploration as postponement.** If everyone has long known what needs to happen, exploring is not diligence but delay.
- **The exploration with a predetermined outcome.** If the answer is already fixed, an exploration is not research but legitimisation. The people involved see right through that – and you squander precisely the trust you wanted to build.
- **The exploration without a sponsor.** An exploration also needs someone who makes a decision at the end. Otherwise your fine report disappears into a drawer.

IN SHORT

Process-oriented working is not a sign of weakness and not a detour. It is the recognition that you do not yet know what you are making – and the craftsmanship to deal with that in a structured way anyway.

Do you know the result? Get started with a project-based approach.

Don't know it yet? Explore first. Then you will know soon enough.