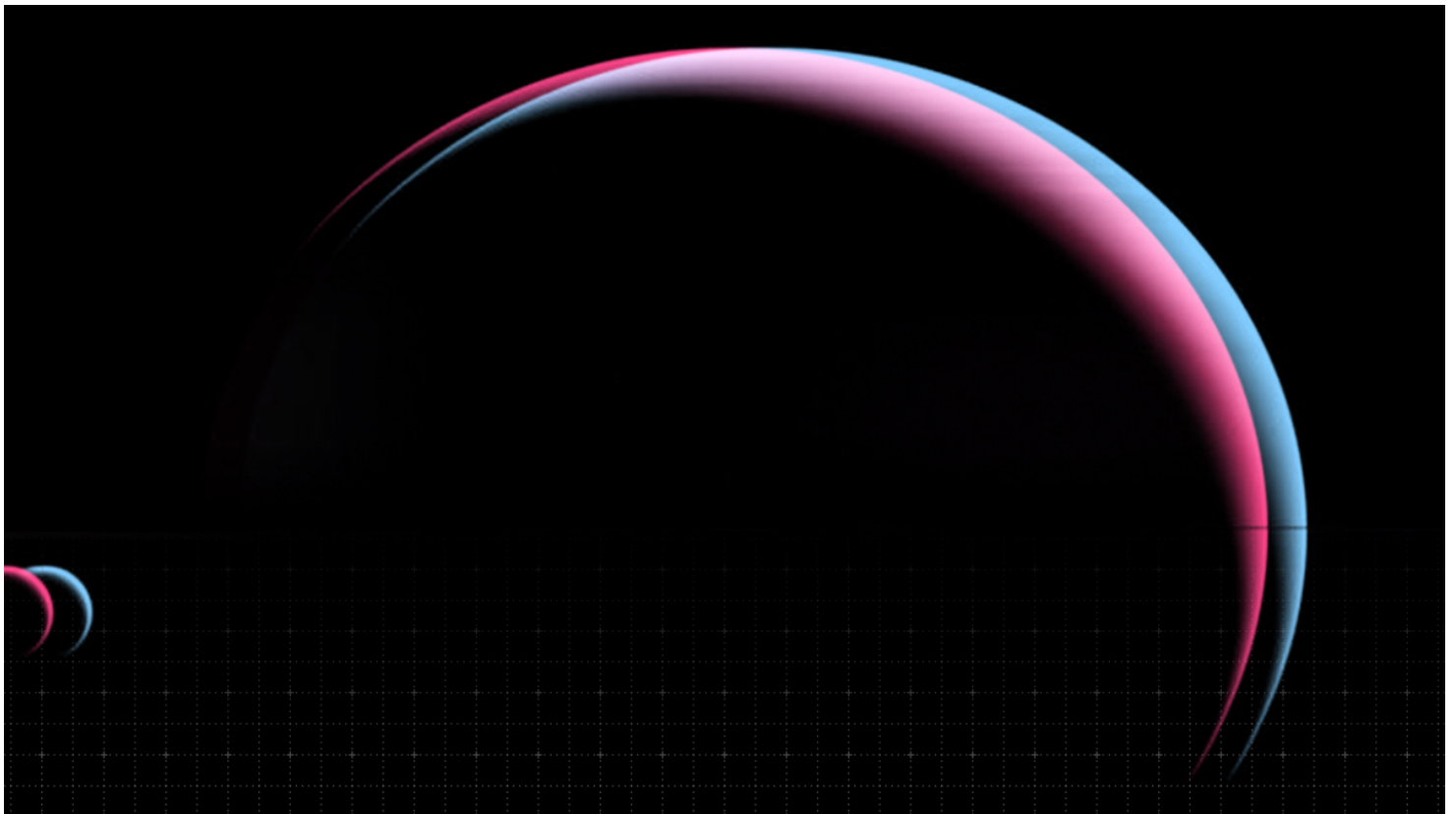


INNOVATION

6 Questions to Ask Before Launching a Moon Shot Project

by [Peter Bregman](#) and [Antonio Nieto-Rodriguez](#)

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NASA moved its timeline up by four years. The new plan? Get humans back to the moon by 2024. Jeff Bezos, the CEO of Amazon, wants in on that race and recently unveiled a life-size model of the spaceship he's betting on. Can

his spaceflight company, Blue Origin, win that race? Will Bezos be sending Prime packages to the moon in 2024?

Our research into hundreds of moon shots, including the launch of the iPhone, the rescue of the Chilean miners in 2010, and the transformation of Curitiba into the greenest city in South America, has led us to build an easy-to-apply framework that helps determine whether a project is well-founded or doomed to fail.

We have come to realize that the success of a project largely depends on six questions. Six simple, straightforward, yes-or-no questions. Below, we'll apply them to Bezos's space ambitions to analyze and assess the likelihood of his moon shot's succeeding (literally and figuratively). As you read, apply these questions to your own moon shot projects and make your own assessment.

By answering the six questions with your leadership team, in sequential order, it will become clear whether your project is in good or bad shape. If the answers are not straightforward – if some of them aren't clear of it there are any doubts – don't be afraid to put the project on hold or to delay the start of it.

Here are the six questions in the order we recommend asking them:

1. Is there a solid business case and a compelling rationale? (The Why)

There are two main reasons we invest resources (time and effort) in a project: either to solve a problem or to capture an opportunity. In this case, Bezos has set a persuasive vision of saving the earth by sending millions of people into space. But is it a clear and compelling *rationale*? Is it critical to humanity that we expand into the cosmos to solve the more pressing challenges our planet faces? Is it going to be a solution just for the richest? Will it be worth the billions it will take to make it a reality? Bezos is clearly passionate about it (we'll get to that more in the next question), but aside from the excitement that the vision elicits, we think that it is slightly vague – are we going to save the earth by 2024? The ultimate goal of the project needs to be clearly and compellingly articulated. Maybe it's for defense? Maybe it's the very survival of our species?

Answer: No

2. Does the moon shot have a committed and charismatic sponsor? (The Who)

Probably the single most important characteristic of a successful transformation project is having a strong, engaged, and charismatic sponsor. In this case, Bezos is that sponsor. And he has said that this moon shot is the most important work he is doing. Do we believe him? The question relates to how many other things he's doing (answer: a lot). But he's certainly believable. He has pursued many metaphorical moon shots in the past and has consistently defied expectations and achieved success. So yes, we believe he's a committed and charismatic (in his own way) sponsor.

Answer: Yes

3. Does the moon shot have a clear scope? (The What)

The scope defines what the project will look like when delivered (not to be confused with the project objectives, the “why,” which we explored in question 1). The more you know about this at the beginning of the project, the better you can estimate the duration, cost, and skills needed to produce the desired outcome. The opposite also applies: The more uncertainty there is about the requirements, the more difficult it is to have an accurate plan.

The literal moon shot is, well, a moon shot. It’s an incredibly difficult endeavor, one that hasn’t been done since 1972. So far, NASA’s proposed rockets have suffered years of delays and are apparently over budget by billions of dollars. There are a lot of unknowns and a tremendous amount of complexity to this undertaking.

And even though you could argue that Bezos’s resources are as unlimited as it gets, an unclear scope poses a real risk to the success of a project. When Bezos announced the project, he didn’t announce what it would cost or when it would be ready. We think that’s because he doesn’t really know.

Answer: No

4. Is there buy-in from key stakeholders? (The How)

The most successful projects occur when all, or at least most, of the key stakeholders (the people impacted by the project, with different degrees of influence) are in favor of it. Even better is when they are driving it.

In project management there is a maxim: “There is always one stakeholder who will be happy if your project fails.” There are regulators, politicians, shareholders, or simply employees who can be obstacles to the success of the endeavor. Still, if we restrict the question to the project itself – Blue Origin building the spaceship – we believe there’s probably strong buy-in from the key stakeholders.

Answer: Yes

5. Does the moon shot have a precise finish line? (The When)

Projects that start with an ambitious and undisputed deadline have a higher chance of success. Starting without a finish line can make a project drag on for months and even years.

In this case, there’s a precedent for this very particular kind of deadline: when John F. Kennedy set the bold goal of putting a man on the moon by end of the 1960s. His words were the inspiration for a project that might never have been possible without that incredibly ambitious finish line.

2024 is the moon shot’s very clear deadline.

Answer: Yes

6. Is the moon shot a true priority? (The Where)

The “Where” domain covers the external elements that can have a positive or negative impact on the project. These areas are often outside the control of the project leader – such as the priority of the project in relation to all the other projects being carried out, or the overall project implementation competencies in the organization – yet there are ways that the leader can influence the project favorably. The executive sponsor plays an important role in influencing the organization too.

Bezos knows a thing or two about creating priorities, and he has built a company around this one, which we have to assume is project-driven.

Answer: Yes

Take time to discuss, clarify, and solidify your answers to these questions. Despite the natural excitement and urgency to start working on them, projects that spend more time in the definition phase tend to have a smoother implementation. We have learned that companies that apply this simple framework as part of the approval-and-review process become better at delivering and generating value from their projects. You can achieve that too.

And what about Bezos’s making his moon shot in 2024? We think he has a solid chance. But we would recommend that he spend more time thinking about the “why” and “what” of the project. His failure to establish Amazon’s HQ2 in New York came from the same vulnerabilities: a lack of a clear purpose and scope. We urge him to fix these shortcomings to significantly increase his chances of succeeding and making another mark on history.



Peter Bregman is the CEO of Bregman Partners, a company that helps successful people become better leaders, create more effective teams, and inspire their organizations to produce great results. Best-selling author of *18 Minutes*, his most recent book is *Leading with Emotional Courage*. He is also the host of the Bregman Leadership Podcast. To identify your leadership gap, take Peter's free assessment.



Antonio Nieto-Rodriguez (antonionietorodriguez.com) is a leading expert in project management and strategy implementation, recognized by Thinkers50 with the prestigious award "Ideas into Practice." He is the author of *The Project Revolution* and *The Focused Organization*, and has been teaching project management for more than a decade to senior executives at Duke CE, Skolkovo, Solvay Business School, and Vlerick. Antonio has held executive positions at PricewaterhouseCoopers, BNP Paribas, and GlaxoSmithKline. Former Chairman of the Project Management Institute, he is the co-founder of the Strategy Implementation Institute and the global movement Brightline.

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What a great article! As a Project Manager who practices as well as teaches, I have always included these questions in my initial discussions to gain clarity on the scope as well as the deliverables. Having a well defined project at the onset is one of the key elements of a successful project. Thanks so much for sharing this!

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