

Advances in Project Management Series¹

On the importance of context: Why situational awareness remains an essential focus

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Context plays a principal part in the processes required for solving problems, managing and making decisions.

Starting with context

Influential architect and design theorist, Christopher Alexander, featured in our most recent column, considered design as an activity made of two symmetrical parts, the form and the context [Alexander, 1964]. The form refers to the solution to the problem which is being constructed by the designer, while the context is the domain – the setting which defines the problem. The ‘search for fitness’ between the two parts is the essential balancing process.

“Fitness is a relation of mutual acceptability between these two. In a problem of design we want to satisfy the mutual demands which the two make on one another. We want to put the context and the form into effortless contact or frictionless coexistence. ... Adaptation is a mutual phenomenon referring to the context’s adaptation to the form as much as the form’s adaptation to its context.” [ibid. p. 19]

Finding a good fit can be achieved through the neutralisation of misfits, the incongruities, irritants and forces which cause clashes that stand out and violate fitness. The design problem can thus be described as an effort to achieve fitness between the form and its context.

“In the case of a real design problem, even our conviction that there is a fit to be achieved is curiously flimsy and insubstantial. We are searching for some kind of harmony between two intangibles: a form which we have not yet designed, and a context which we cannot properly describe” [ibid.. p. 26]

¹The PMWJ *Advances in Project Management* series includes articles by authors of program and project management books previously published by Gower in the UK and now by Routledge. Each month an introduction to the current article is provided by series editor **Prof Darren Dalcher**, who is also the editor of the Gower/Routledge *Advances in Project Management* series of books on new and emerging concepts in PM. To learn more about the book series, go to <https://www.routledge.com/Advances-in-Project-Management/book-series/APM>. Prof Dalcher’s article is an introduction to the invited paper this month in the PMWJ.

“The only reason we have for thinking that there must be some kind of fit to be achieved between them is that we can detect incongruities, or negative instances of it. The incongruities in an ensemble are the primary data of experience. If we agree to treat fit as the absence of misfits, and to use a list of those potential misfits which are most likely to occur as our criterion for fit, our theory will at least have the same nature as our intuitive conviction that there is a problem to be solved” [ibid., p. 26-7].

Context can therefore be said to be essential to the framing and problem solving practiced within the realms of architecture and design.

Other domains also tend to look beyond the objective and question additional aspects related to a problem and the given situation.

The person and the situation

One of the most recognised landmark studies in psychology, the Stanford Prison Experiment, was devised to evaluate the impact of perceived power and position. The experiment conducted at Stanford University in 1971, investigated the psychology of imprisonment. Volunteer participants were arrested in their homes by the local police department and ‘charged’ with armed robbery. Prisoners were booked by the police, strip-searched and issued with a new identity before being transported from the police station to mock prison cells in the university basement.

The mock prison was operated by other volunteers acting as guards. 12 of the 24 participants were assigned the role of guards, while the other 12 were assigned the role of prisoners. Guards were provided with suitable accessories including batons and sunglasses. The intention was to conduct a two-week prison simulation. But the environment, and context, in which the experiment was conducted, had an enormous impact on participants, beyond the expectations of the experiment designers.

Within days the ‘guards’ began enforcing authoritarian measures, subjecting prisoners to psychological torture. The study had to be terminated before the first week was out when the ‘guards’ became increasingly sadistic and the prisoners ‘pathological’.

Stanford psychologist, Professor Philip Zimbardo, who designed and conducted the experiment summarised it as follows:

“The primary simple lesson from the Stanford Prison Experiment teaches is that situations matter. Social situations can have more profound effects on the behaviour and mental functioning of individuals, groups and national leaders than we might believe possible. Some situations can exert such powerful influence over us that we can be led to behave in ways we would not, could not, predict was possible in advance.” [Zimbardo, 2007, p. 211]

While the Stanford Prison Experiment remains controversial it highlights the complex interactions between the personal and the situational determinants of behaviour. The discipline of social psychology continues to study the impact and relationship between the person and the situation.

Researchers in other disciplines, including human computer interaction (HCI), knowledge management, and communications also endeavour to take account of the situated nature of human social behaviour and account for the context. Action and change efforts thus require a deeper engagement with both context, and situated understanding.

Finding context in projects?

Do project management approaches and indeed the wider profession take any account of project context?

The Sixth edition of the APM Body of Knowledge is divided into four sections: context, people, delivery and interfaces. The section on context, asserts that “the context of a project, programme or portfolio is made up of two areas: governance and setting”. Governance deals with procedural and cultural aspects encompassing aspects such as sponsors, success factors and maturity, while the setting is concerned with the organisational environment and strategic management. Given the primacy of the position offered to context, one would expect to see an extended dialogue regarding its impact on and application to project practice; yet, there is very little that is said about context within the guidance, the methodologies or even in the existing bodies of knowledge.

Yet, if every project is unique with its own special context, and if every project is likely to involve people who will need to interact with the social situation, one would expect to find a variety of models and approaches that can take account of such diversity. In reality, it is difficult to find relevant explicit guidance that can be tailored to a specific context.

Taking into account considerations related to context and specific situations requires a new way of conceiving and viewing projects and their management. It also requires fresh ways of thinking about project practice. This month’s contribution encourages project managers to seriously reconsider their approach to project work by introducing a typology of projects and project situations. The article written by Oliver Lehmann, is developed from his recent book, *Situational Project Management: The Dynamics of Success and Failure* published by CRC Press. The typology invokes multiple dimensions, each representing different situations and project contexts. The direct implication is that each dimension would require different considerations. A project situation may therefore involve a balance of different factors and positions from across the various dimensions, necessitating intelligent consideration regarding the approaches and responses that would match that particular situation.

Lehmann’s concept of situational project management makes a crucial contribution to the discipline by encouraging managers to engage with their context and identify the required dimensions of their project situation. Thinking about the different situations enables the identification of the essential characteristics of the project. It can thus be

used to inform the management style and approach and select tools that emphasise that articular perspective.

The importance of situational awareness

Situational awareness implies an appreciation of the wider context of a given situation including the environmental influences. US educator and businessman Stephen R Covey described his 5th habit of highly effective people as “*seek first to understand, then to be understood*”. Covey is advocating for a general understanding of a person and their position. A similar case can be made for appreciating a situation in a finer, or deeper, level of detail. Indeed, as often asserted in problem solving and communication theory, without relevant context it is impossible to receive a message, address a situation, understand a problem or resolve a dilemma.

Lehmann’s work thus offers a more intimate perspective on the unique features of projects. Yet, equally critically it challenges the hegemony of adopting a single ‘best’ approach to project work.

Believers in one-size fits all may be disappointed at the lack of a magic recipe. Engaging with context requires adding a twist of common sense to accommodate the specific details and peculiarities of each particular scenario. The wisdom of relying on the habit of ‘best practice’ is similarly tested by virtue of the distinguished characteristics that typify each scenario giving it a distinct flavour.

Many disciplines run an extended affair with what is labelled as ‘best practices’. In reality, there is little competition and comparison before a practice is selected as best in class on the basis of performance in a particular task or environment. Even when one practice is recognised as best in class it is only to the extent that it has proved useful in some limited, constrained or a somewhat controlled environment.

Physician, psychologist and thinking guru Edward de Bono was acutely aware of the role of determining facts and habits, noting that “*Science only works because in any experiment it is assumed that the context is held constant while one factor (the experimental variable) is altered*”. Yet life is never that simple.

Confucius observed that real knowledge implies knowing the extent of one’s ignorance. Understanding the context and the situational parameters of a problem provides the added background required to inform and make effective decisions. In Philosopher Karl Popper’s words: “*true ignorance is not the absence of knowledge but the refusal to acquire it*”

It is often said that the greatest obstacle to knowledge is not ignorance but the illusion of knowledge, which can often masquerade as ignoring the specific and assuming that the general applies. Professionals cannot afford the luxury of simplifying or ignoring such contextual essence. In assuming that the context is held constant, they might be removing the truly critical aspects that provide leverage and offer insight.

Methodology and process aficionados need to likewise learn to acknowledge the unique aspects of each situation and assess their importance and implications. When we truly accept that projects are unique; understanding the context and specific details of each situation would result in a greater recognition of risks, opportunities and the ultimate potential for success, and failure that are situated alongside and inside that project.

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Editor's note: Editor's note: Prof Darren Dalcher, is the editor of the Gower/Routledge Advances in Project Management series of books on new and emerging concepts in PM. To learn more about the book series, go to <https://www.routledge.com/Advances-in-Project-Management/book-series/APM>. The above article is an introduction to the invited paper this month by another Routledge author. You can find previously published articles by Prof Dalcher and Gower authors at www.pmworldlibrary.net.

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