

Venturesome Behaviour ...venture capital for today's projects

By Martin Price

I recall a recent project meeting where the participants reached a point when they were unable to prevent opposing views and interests, bringing the negotiations to a halt. There was frustration and resentment in abundance. Fortunately, someone was able to introduce a new way of understanding our predicament. He helped to save face all-round and the contribution was crucial to the survival and eventually to the success of an important meeting. His astute questioning did the trick; bringing very welcome humour and candour to the proceedings.

Almost single-handedly, he heralded a positive mood. As I heard him, I sensed his courageous intent, a clear insight into the dynamics in the group, well developed social skills and a respect for the group's members. In my experience, this kind of brave and insightful contribution, where someone poses the key questions, expresses appreciation, shares different ways of thinking and is prepared to risk a rebuff, is frequently a crucial factor for a group tackling issues open to contention. The behaviour of project players, their engagement in groups and their collaboration between groups, lie at the heart of their conduct in managing projects. Project management can be defined simply but it is never easy to accomplish. There can be no greater goal for a project organisation than for its leaders to encourage the venturesome behaviour of its players and to fashion the conditions needed for this most precious asset to seize the agenda. That way, success can get to be more reliable and a whole lot easier.

An absence of Venturesome Behaviour

Of course the opposite of these behaviours will bring difficulty, delay or both. The unwillingness to listen, the absence of personal recognition, the casual oversight, the naivety towards political forces at work, the perils of pride, the obfuscation, the lack of grace and the side-lining of people showing reluctance to 'know their place', are behaviours that are too common. On 28th January 1986 Challenger exploded shortly after lift-off. Remember the 'O' rings? The official enquiry did not cite a technical flaw as the cause of the disaster but instead attributed it to the 'normalised deviance' of the players, amounting to a failure of their organisation. It reported the root cause to be the engineering group's feelings of invulnerability, the pressure from Congress and the 'group think' pattern of social conformity by which they failed to properly examine and act upon the risks attached to their decisions.

Human and organisational competence

While project players are continually offered opportunities to enhance project pace and to improve methods and goals, in many organisations either responses lack resolve and tenacity or serious curiosity is sporadic. Forces within organisations as

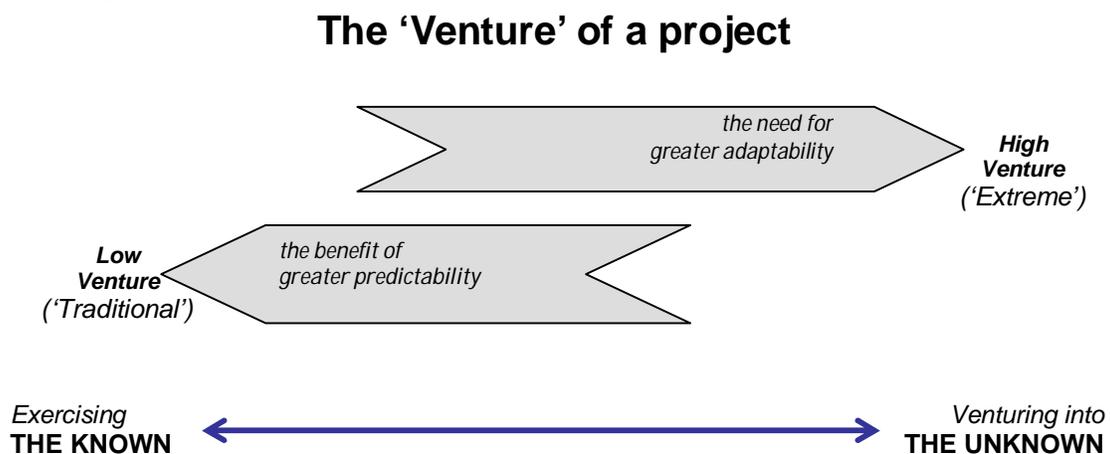
well as within players themselves, inhibit ‘taking the ball’ and running with it. The reports of high project failure rates are in my experience often explained by player’s propositions not being scrutinized by their colleagues with the necessary objectivity and rigour. Projects can be sluggish with players failing to observe, connect and inspire. Enterprise, high expectation and leadership are often lacking and the vision ahead left obscure to many of the players. All this comes at a heavy price: limiting the vitality and collaboration on which projects depend. Mediocrity wins, the days become long and opportunities are lost.

Only when social capital is being actively deployed can human and organisational capability be appreciated for its asset value. The qualities of the players’ ability to work in groups, their will, critical thinking, communication, clear-headedness and social interaction can only be realised when the project regime is fully engaged and stretched. Projects absolutely depend on this dynamic capability as the engine of its success. The extent of players’ resolve, dialogue and mobilisation represents a project regime’s venture capital. This is always hard-won and for project work, the need is relentless and easily stood down.

Where venture matters

Projects vary immensely in the range and extent of the challenges presented. The level of venture needed varies accordingly. (See Figure 1) At one end, projects are found to be a predictable exercise, providing a practical response to well-known and well understood requirements and circumstances (labelled ‘Low Venture’). The project’s purpose and the stakeholder’s expectations are both clear and can be safely expected to sustain. In such projects, that we might refer to as ‘Traditional’, plans are a reliable prediction of what is to happen. Process prescriptions and methods to achieve a successful execution commonly define what is to be done, when and how.

Figure 1



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At the opposite end of the range, projects are quite different and more demanding and at the far end of the range are sometimes referred to as 'Extreme'. Here, what has to be achieved and how are to an extent unknown (and sometimes unknowable until the project is under-way). The challenges are of ambiguity, controversy, innovation, complexity, risk in an un-predictable external environment. In these circumstances, to have a venturesome project regime is vital. All sectors of the economy are now showing increasing dependence on High Venture projects and programmes. They need greater 'Venture Capital'.

As we move along this range, from the 'Traditional', a project regime's adaptability becomes increasingly important and the reliance on prescription falls away. The level of venture grows and at some point along the continuum a shift occurs. At this point the project begins to be driven more by what is learned from emergent issues and fresh insights than by plans and formulae set in advance. This is High Venture territory. The variety of perspectives required and the need for close connection with stakeholders as project players, means that the project's challenges become predominantly human and organisational.

All players contributing to the project need to respond. In high venture projects, the capability of groups will rely on players' competence and collaboration; more so than on any prescribed routines. Well-developed human and organisational behaviours must characterise the project management community and the project's Venture Capital has to be substantial; with competent players closely and purposefully engaged.

Propelling a project organisation by its Venture Capital

Sponsoring a project as well as contributing to it directly, involves players in an endeavour that draws heavily on their social and political skills, as well as their capacity to deploy methods and technique. Project players are engaged in work that is amongst the most demanding of all tasks and on which our security and wealth-generation now increasingly depend. Their quality of thinking and dialogue, sense of discovery and the capacity for organisational agility punches with more weight than can any prescription for process or method. What is to be done and how and the way that the organisation adapts to the on-going needs of a project, have to be orchestrated by the project players themselves.

Project management methodologies and tools offer us techniques and systematic processes to aid progress. In future articles I shall be describing how 'Socially Enabled Project Management' provides a corresponding framework addressing the human and organisational behaviour of a project organization: the place where projects are managed.

About the Author



Martin Price

CEO, EngagementWorks



Martin Price is the founder and CEO of EngagementWorks, a consultancy assisting project organisations to collaborate, adapt, become more reliable and accelerate their rate of progress. He was until 2010, Director of Professional Development for the UK Chapter of the Project Management Institute (PMI®) and acted as 'finder' and Speaker Host for the monthly meetings of the UK Chapter in London over six years. He is a regular speaker, conference convener and writer on the subject of project management. Martin has been a contributor to the preparation of professional standards for both APM and PMI.

Following a career in engineering, industrial relations and personnel management, Martin spent 10 years with PA Consulting Group leading projects to help businesses and project organisations to adapt and improve their skills, structures and capabilities. Martin has worked internationally and has experience as a trainer and consultant in the US, Sweden, Central Africa, The Middle East and India, as well as Britain.

His book 'Projects, gathering pace' is to be published shortly.

Based in Northampton, UK, Martin can be contacted at mprice@engagementworks.com. For more information, visit www.engagementworks.com.