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Is there a universal theory of project management?
Prof Darren Dalcher
Series Article

Advances in Project Management Series[1]

Is there a universal theory of project management?

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Introduction to the Advances in Project Management Series Article

Teaching project management is a challenge. First, there is the question of where to position the faculty. Should it sit within engineering? Or might it fit better in a business school? Or perhaps it needs to be positioned as a generic discipline, which applies in all domains and endeavours. Then, there is the question related to the philosophical underpinning: namely, is project management a science or an art? The award students obtain should reflect that orientation in its title. Once these aspects are out of the way, all that is needed is the body of knowledge (and the evidence that supports it).

Now, it might be tempting to settle for a set of processes and procedures as they help us to perform tasks more skillfully. Reducing skills into a set of procedures is appealing from a pedagogic perspective as it offers a natural structure that can be translated into a lesson plan and ultimately pared down to a set of steps to be memorised.

However, in reality we all know that the craft and discipline of project management cannot be reduced to chunks of knowledge. The skills, behaviours and interactions of successful project managers rely on understanding the complex interplay between people, organisations and change. Lessons from project failures have taught us to take heed of relationships, expectations, trust, communication, politics, conflict and even human follies and imperfections. Yet these aspects are not included in the formally published bodies of knowledge.

Practitioners increasingly talk about a mismatch between project management theory and practice. Some papers published in the academic literature even contend that project management theory is harmful to project management practice. In an ideal world the two would be intertwined so that practice is the source of theory, and theory leads to improved practice. Drawing on experience could thus become the source for generating the new knowledge required to make sense of the experiences and find their meaning.

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[1]*The Advances in Project Management series includes articles by authors of program and project management books published by Gower in the UK. Each month an introduction to the currently monthly article is provided by series editor **Prof Darren Dalcher**, who is also the editor of the Gower Advances in Project Management series of books on new and emerging concepts in PM. For more on Gower project management, visit http://www.gowerpublishing.com/default.aspx?page=2063.*

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Continuing to explore and discover enables one to make sense of the environment and begin to address the challenge of uncertainty.

The question is what knowledge can we draw upon? The author of this month 's column is offering to take us on a daring journey. Michael Hatfield, author of Game Theory in Management, recently published by Gower, is well known to many project managers for his insightful perspective on the discipline. In his article he challenges us to rethink the received knowledge and evaluate its effectiveness.

Bodies of knowledge have been with us for a considerable amount of time, yet as a profession we are still struggling to get organisations to adopt them. In a Darwinian economy those who do not adopt the received wisdom would be wiped out, unless that is, that wisdom was not a sufficient condition for success. Michael Hatfield is challenging the discipline to question the track record of the approaches.

The book makes a strong case for developing models to test the feasibility and usefulness of management decisions and their consequences. The book shows that the results of such modeling may question many of the underpinning wisdoms of management theory. Indeed, according to the findings, some of the management approaches advocated as best practice, may prove to be detrimental in many areas of management. In the book and the article Michael is asking some very important and very uncomfortable questions. Indeed, what would happen if our bodies of knowledge were misconceived and counter-productive?

Arthur Conan Doyle, observed that it was a "a capital mistake to theorize before one has data" as insensibly one would begin to twist facts to suit theories, instead of theories to suit facts.

A maturing profession should be questioning its basis of knowledge and evidence. The philosopher Karl Popper noted that whenever a theory appears to be the only possible one, it is a sign that we have neither understood the theory nor the problem which it was intended to solve. Over many generations, science has shown to be prepared to abandon an idea for a better one. Perhaps the test of where project management should be sited could depend on whether it has developed a similar way of adjusting to what may become a long search for universal understanding that will give us the undisputed theory of project management.

Editor's note: Darren Dalcher is the editor of the series of books on Advances in Project Management published by Gower in the UK. Information about the Gower series can be found at http://www.gowerpublishing.com/advancesinprojectmanagement. The above article is an introduction to the invited paper this month in the PMWJ by Gower author Michael Hatfield on the subject of "The Coming Sea-Change in Project Management Science." You can find previously published articles by Prof Dalcher and Gower authors at www.pmworldlibrary.net.

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Darren Dalcher, Ph.D. HonFAPM, FRSA, FBCS, CITP, FCMI is Professor of Project Management at the University of Hertfordshire, and founder and Director of the National Centre for Project Management (NCPM) in the UK. He has been named by the Association for Project Management (APM) as one of the top 10 "movers and shapers" in project management in 2008 and was voted Project Magazine's "Academic of the Year" for his contribution in "integrating and weaving academic work with practice". Following industrial and consultancy experience in managing IT projects, Professor Dalcher gained his PhD in Software Engineering from King's College, University of London. Professor Dalcher has written over 150 papers and book chapters on project management and software engineering. He is Editor-in-Chief of *Software Process Improvement and Practice,* an international journal focusing on capability, maturity, growth and improvement. He is the editor of the book series, *Advances in Project Management*, published by Gower Publishing of a new companion series *Fundamentals of Project Management*. Heavily involved in a variety of research projects and subjects, Professor Dalcher has built a reputation as leader and innovator in the areas of practice-based education and reflection in project management. He works with many major industrial and commercial organisations and government bodies in the UK and beyond. He is an Honorary Fellow of the APM, a Chartered Fellow of the British Computer Society, a Fellow of the Chartered Management Institute, and the Royal Society of Arts, and a Member of the Project Management Institute (PMI), the Academy of Management, the Institute for Electrical and Electronics Engineers, and the Association for Computing Machinery. He is a Chartered IT Practitioner. He is a Member of the PMI Advisory Board responsible for the prestigious David I. Cleland project management award and of the APM Professional Development Board. Prof Dalcher is an academic editorial advisor for the *PM World Journal*. He can be contacted at d.dalcher2@herts.ac.uk.