

Advances in Project Management Series¹

Professionalism, ethics and the freedom to ask the right questions

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Introduction to the April 2013 Advances in PM Series Article

The recently published sixth edition of the APM Body of Knowledge states that: “a key requirement of a profession is that individual members should act ethically”.

It is useful to remember that the concerns of practitioners extend beyond the financial aspects and considerations of a project, or even beyond the issues raised as part of the typical constraints of cost, time, scope and quality. The APM Body of Knowledge reminds practitioners that trust and respect are essential elements of professional practice and must underpin the actions of practitioners. Trust is gained by working consistently and transparently in a moral, legal, responsible and socially appropriate manner. Respect results from how professional conduct is perceived by relevant stakeholders and participants.

Yet, acting responsibly is never simple. Multiple stakeholders engage different perspectives, values and preferences. Their concerns and considerations reflect their role, personal position and interests. The more parties involved, the greater the challenge in reconciling and negotiating between their concerns. Untangling the complex web of politics, deception and coercion demands exceptional negotiation skills and insightful thinking.

Given the different sets of competing values and concerns, it is already clear that ethics is not about separating ‘right’ from ‘wrong’. Multiple participants will have relevant considerations that need to be addressed. It is never as simple as avoiding the wrongs.

In problem solving parlance the simpler distinction between good or bad is often utilised. This is not an absolute judgment, but is rather an expression of the ‘goodness’ of a solution. A solution is good if it satisfies the key concerns expressed in the problem. While it indicates acceptance that a solution is not right, but simply good enough, it still does not do justice to the tapestry of concerns, views and values embedded in every non-trivial project.

¹The *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>.

The tapestry of perspectives implies that the natural tendency to choose between black and white needs to be overhauled and replaced by the capability to cope with and distinguish between different shades of grey. All actors and participants have legitimate concerns that merit fair consideration. Prioritisation and trade-offs between incompatible, and often competing sets of values can nonetheless be challenging and involve political posturing and expectation management.

Project managers can utilise stakeholder management and decision making tools in making some of the more complex decisions. However, they also need to adopt a more questioning stance that enables ethical considerations to be addressed in an appropriate manner.

The article by Michael Cavanagh offers an essential, yet very simple tool for addressing ethical dilemmas. It is a tool that can be easily and quickly applied and offer fresh insights whilst challenging long held thinking patterns. This basic tool is the application of the question 'why?'.

Understanding the basis of decisions and preferences can uncover assumptions and challenge expectations. It provides much needed rationale for aspects that are never explored or addressed and is thus a welcome addition that can be easily utilised by professional and responsible project managers.

Michael's article identifies some of the reasons and justifications for using this tool. Michael is the author of the book *Second Order Project Management*, published by Gower as part of the Advances in Project Management series. The book explores some of the issues related to outcomes and ethics, and that discussion is expanded through the present article.

Projects, by their nature, imply some amount of choice between ethics and expediency. Making the correct choice is of crucial importance.

Distinguished author, humanist and Nobel Laureate Elie Wiesel reminds us that "there may be times when we are powerless to prevent injustice, but there must never be a time when we fail to protest". As our projects and change endeavours continue to shape society and its future, project managers are increasingly expected to adopt a responsible and professional stance. Considering ethical argument and moral principle, and questioning the rationale and motivation for decisions, assumptions, and actions may take us some way towards developing our capacity for dealing with ethical dilemmas and developing trust and respect as the hallmarks of our growing responsibility and professionalism.

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 Cavanagh. 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.