
Project work and line-of-business work -the power of candid conversation

By Martin Price

Many if not most project organisations serve line-of-business organisations. However, the differences between managing a project and managing business as usual (BAU) can sometimes be overlooked and lead to unexpected difficulties. This is sometimes illustrated by business executives who despite their dependence on the results of project work have little appreciation of the challenges and patterns of project working. Some who we can refer to as ‘host executives’, often remain unaware of the unpredictability and regular disorder that ‘goes with the territory’ of a project management endeavour. They can be heard to say, “They are all professionals in their own right: they collect information, they evaluate it and then use it to solve problems just like the rest of us.”

Project professionals in their wider community should be asking themselves more than perhaps they do whether they are representing and defending the particular circumstances and responses that are implicit to their trade.

So, how well is the difference between working on a business process (e.g. sales, cost accounting, marketing, production, etc.) and working on a project, generally understood? Of course there are some businesses that are entirely devoted to managing projects (examples include some engineering construction businesses) where everyone is deployed as a project player. In many projects however, players come from other functions and need to adjust their working practices. A project management academic who when pressed to answer the question “what distinguished project management from other management work?” is reputed to have answered, “They manage a life-cycle”. We need to ask ourselves whether this provides us with an understanding sufficient to comprehend some more crucial differences.

When a project regime is embedded within a business organisation, one that is essentially unfamiliar with delivering a project, the host is often seen to be placing undue limitation on the discretion of the project regime. The traditions and preferences of the host, as these are expressed in their familiar processes and culture, behaviour, relationships, patterns of accountability and hierarchy operate differently; sometimes very differently to the ways that are needed in the management of a project.

A capable project regime needs some freedom of action to maximise performance. Delegation of authority between the project regime and the host organisation needs continual and careful attention and there are times in this relationship when negotiation will be regular.

Stanley Deetz, professor at the University of Colorado in Boulder in his 2003 Becker lecture said,

“In today's world, unless you have exceptionally low labor costs, competitive advantage comes from high creativity, highly committed employees and the ability to customize products. All require a very involved and participating workforce. *Creativity requires us to allow differences to make a difference.* Most high-end companies know that they are more dependent on the social and intellectual capital possessed by employees than on financial investment.” (Deetz, 2003)

A project lies in the vanguard of functions seeking to build ‘high venture’ workgroups. Deetz’s vision of the qualities required of organisations today offer a valuable pointer.

For a project regime to be sufficiently responsive to the demands for performance improvement and innovation, the behaviours of players as leaders in workgroups have to be readily adaptable. Otherwise progress will be slow and the necessary energy will be quickly spent. It is the experience of players, their resolve, knowledge and capacity for engagement, collaboration and pace that enable progress.

The impact of a project regime begins with its sensing, thinking and the social engagement of the players. This in turn relies on purposeful and dedicated conversation. Without this we cannot expect the generation and distillation of creativity, rigour and the means to progress. Social engagement must inspire and sustain the reasoning necessary for acquiring the collective will to pursue a progressive course. It also helps to dislodge those community inhibitions that sometimes set barriers within command structures.

The argument developed by Scott E page in ‘The Difference’ is summarised by his maxim ‘Diversity trumps ability’. He claims to show that collective wisdom when properly harvested is greater than the sum of its parts and that workgroups when able to present themselves with a range of perspectives consistently outperform the like-minded experts contributing as individuals. For this to happen, a regime has to be determined, wisely led, politically astute, open in its conversation, wary of over-prescription, sensitive to opportunity, always venturesome, able to recognise early hitherto unimagined constraints and to take advantage of those occasions needing rich and rigorous dialogue – and if necessary re-think.

Human behaviour is unpredictable. We have to find ways to benefit from this truth, more than we inevitably grieve over it.

About the Author



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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, recruiter and consultant in the US, Sweden, Central Africa, The Middle East and India, as well as Britain.

His book 'The Single Minded Project, is to be published shortly. This 're-thinks' project management: placing human and organisational behavior centre-stage and introducing many new ideas and methods to strengthen a project regime's capacity to deliver reliably.

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