

## **Further thoughts on the nature of, and futures for, project management**

*By Alan Stretton*

### **INTRODUCTION**

In a recent series in this journal on project successes and failures, I discussed my strongly held viewpoint that project management needs to ensure that “the right project is being done”, in addition to ensuring that “the project is done right”. My basic reasoning for this is simple, and derives from the question, “if the ‘right’ project is not being done, what is the relevance of ‘doing the project right’?”

My response is that I believe the project management community has an obligation to the public at large, and to relevant sectors of the public, to be able to reassure them that the right projects are being done. I believe that many members of the public have such an expectation, and that if the right projects are not being done, and therefore fail, they will quite reasonably blame the project managers. The excuse that we did the project right, and that it is not our concern if it was not the right project, will most likely be seen for what it is – an abrogation of responsibility by the project management community.

I know there are many who do not agree with me. They regard project management as an execution-only avocation, and believe that “doing the project right” is all that is required. I believe such a perspective is myopic, and is an active barrier to project management making a much fuller contribution than it currently does to society at large. This article explores some possibilities for enhancing the latter aspiration.

### **SOME REASONS WHY THE “RIGHT” PROJECTS ARE OFTEN NOT BEING DONE**

There is plenty of evidence that, all too often, the “right” projects are not being done. There appear to be two types of causes for this.

1. In some cases the initial choice of project is evidently wrong. There appear to be two ways in which this can occur.
  - 1a. One is due to faulty work in formulating the organization’s strategic objectives, and/or in developing the strategic portfolio of projects/programs to achieve these objectives, and/or in making poor choices regarding one or more of the component projects.
  - 1b. Another, in relation to individual projects, is failure to do a proper job of ascertaining the client’s real business (or equivalent) needs, before establishing the requirements which a project (or projects) need to achieve to best help satisfy these needs.

2. Even when the initial choice of project is “right”, errors can occur in initial establishment of the project requirements, and/or later development of these requirements into a project definition.

## **REASONS FOR INVOLVING PROJECT MANAGEMENT IN ENSURING THAT THE “RIGHT” PROJECTS ARE DONE**

Referring to the above nominated causes for “right” projects not being done, arguments for involving project management include the following.

- 1a. The fifth article of the series on project successes/failures (Stretton 2015d) discussed ways and means of increasing project management involvement in organizational strategic planning. The broad overall reason is to help ensure the right project(s) is(are) chosen in the evolving strategic portfolio of projects.

Another relatively unique contribution the project manager can make to the strategic management process is to provide specific skills and experience in progressive elaboration – in this case of the strategic objectives into a portfolio of projects and programs help to achieve them.

Additionally, project management skills and experience in integrating the contribution of others may be very relevant if representatives of different departments and the like are contributing to the strategic planning process.

- 1b. The key importance of properly ascertaining, or confirming, the client’s real business (or equivalent) needs, before establishing the requirements which a project (or projects) need to achieve to best help satisfy these needs, is being increasingly acknowledged in the project management literature, and practiced in more and more application areas. There are project management people who specialize in this work in various domains, so that if the client organization does not have its own relevant specialist, project management will often have a very specific expertise to contribute to this work.
2. The fourth article of the series on project successes/failures (Stretton 2015c) was very specifically concerned with ways and means of increasing project management involvement in initial establishment of the project requirements for individual projects, and development of these requirements into a project definition. Here, project management has three very specific skills to offer.

The first is experience in progressive elaboration – in this case from initial project requirements to more detailed project definition.

The second, of course, is the knowledge of just what is required in a project definition document to ensure that it is in a form which is optimum for further development into the execution phases of the project.

Third, project management integrative skills will be very relevant if there are many diverse interested parties to this process.

Summarizing this section on reasons for involving project management in ensuring that the “right” projects are being done, the over-riding reason is seen to be an obligation for the project management community to facilitate this by helping ensure that either the right projects are chosen, or that they are professionally defined in ways that are properly understandable to those who have to implement them.

I have argued that the best way of achieving these aims is for project management to become intimately involved in project initiation processes. As already noted, I know there are many who don’t necessarily agree. However, I see such execution-only perceptions of project management as restrictive, not in the best interests of customers, and not in the best interest of those who seek to advance the scope and influence of project management (or perhaps more relevantly, the management of projects).

The above analysis also revealed some embedded project management skills which are directly relevant to enhancing project initiation processes. They are

- Skills and experience in progressive elaboration processes;
- Skills and experience in integration processes in dynamic environments;
- Specific knowledge of what is required for effective project definition documentation;
- In some areas, specific skills and experience in client needs determination.

All these bullet points are about contributions by project management in areas which have often been seen as the domain of general management, which we will come to shortly.

However, it also suggests some longer-term potential opportunities, which I would like to address first.

## **POSSIBLE LONGER-TERM OPPORTUNITIES FROM A MANAGEMENT OF PROJECTS PERSPECTIVE**

### **Integration processes in broader contexts**

Integration responsibilities are not confined to project management. General managers have long been recognized as integrators. For example Lawrence & Lorsch 1967 published an article in the Harvard Business Review entitled “New management job: the integrator”, in which they defined integration as follows:

As used in this article, integration is the achievement of unity of effort among the major functional specialists in a business.

However, the time horizons in a general management context are generally far longer than in project management, where time pressures (due to the project life cycle) make integration a much more frequent and demanding responsibility. This would appear to give project managers an “edge” in knowledge and experience in integration processes at large.

## **A need for more “integrators” or “synthesists” in society at large**

In Stretton & Crawford 2011, we argued that a significant section of the forward-looking non-management community is concerned with the downside of increasing specialization, and sees a need for “synthesists” to expertly integrate the work of many different disciplines to achieve broader societal (or similar) goals.

As just discussed, project managers generally have very specific skills in integration, and are therefore well placed to expand their roles, and become effective “synthesists” in a wider domain.

However, there are some barriers to be overcome before this can happen, including changing awareness of such possibilities in the public at large, and in the project management community itself. An associated impediment is that the project management community at large has not succeeded in integrating its own efforts in a way which would demonstrate, in practice, its capabilities for integration in a more general context.

Unless these barriers are overcome, the longer-term opportunity for project managers to expand their perceived role from direct association with projects towards a much broader association with integrating and/or synthesizing activities at large may be lost. However, if they are overcome, a vast new horizon of endeavour would become available for project people.

## **DIFFERENCES AND SIMILARITIES BETWEEN PROJECT MANAGEMENT AND GENERAL MANAGEMENT**

### **A personal perspective**

In my experience in project-based organizations, there was essentially no real distinction made between project management and general management. Many of us moved between project management and general management positions quite freely, with no real problems in coping with the different responsibilities. Virtually all of us were, or had been, project managers. For example, I was involved directly in the strategic planning arena for Lend Lease Corporation for some seven years, and for twice that time with its main subsidiary, Civil & Civic (in spite of having come from a project management background). In these organizations, project managers were always involved right from the outset with project initiation activities.

From these experiences, I suspect that it is mainly in production-based organizations that project managers experience difficulties in becoming more involved in project initiation activities.

### **A tendency to emphasise differences rather than similarities**

A second point which appears to be worth following up on is an observation which Peter Morris has been making for nearly as long as I can remember. Quite recently, in Morris 2013:116, he says

....the project development [life] cycle is, for me, the one thing that differentiates projects from non-projects.

As I have pointed out many times (e.g. Stretton 2011g), the project management literature tends to emphasize differences between project management and general management. In one way this is rather natural, but it also tends to under-emphasize the similarities.

It appears to me that those who emphasize the differences are basically exhibiting an execution-only perception of the nature of project management.

My own belief is that it may be more productive to focus on commonalities between general management and project management. This, in turn, suggests that it may be more useful to discuss “the management of projects”, rather than project management per se, as Peter Morris has so consistently advocated over so many years – e.g. in Morris 1994.

### **Revisiting relationships between general management and project management**

I have discussed relationships between general management and project management very specifically on two previous occasions in PM World Today (Stretton 2010h, 2011g), as well as partial discussions in several other articles. However, there has been little feedback. On reflection, these articles were perhaps rather too generalized to appeal to readers who prefer more detailed discussions on relationships between general management and project management.

The importance of relationships between the two is well known, and broadly acknowledged. For example, PMI 2004:15 put it this way:

General management provides the foundation for building project management skills and is often essential for the project manager. On any given project, skill in any number of general management areas may be required. General management literature documents these skills, and their application is fundamentally the same on a project.

The general management literature is so voluminous that one suspects that relatively few project managers are likely to have a comprehensive knowledge of this literature. Now, some aspects of general management are already quite well covered in the project management literature. However, some other aspects are not so well covered, and a few hardly at all.

This led me to the thought that it might be useful to present an overview of basic general management materials, and then to discuss their relevance to the management of projects. I am proposing to tackle this somewhat daunting task in an upcoming series of articles – admittedly with substantial misgivings, for rather obvious reasons. However, even if only a few readers find it useful, it will have been worth the effort.

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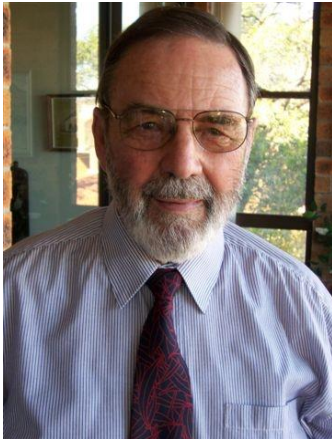
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