
Advances in Project Management Series¹

Progress through people: The study of projects as if people mattered

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Last month's article highlighted the role of complexity and made a case for organizational learning and systems thinking as an integrating discipline. Guided coaching can play a part in improving performance and getting the team to think and work together. Indeed, learning and development represent an ongoing challenge for those seeking to improve the performance of project systems; a challenge that requires attention and development of all project players. This theme will now be explored in greater depth.

Small is beautiful

The title of this article is a play on the name of a successful book, *Small is Beautiful, the Study of Economics as if People Mattered*, by British economist Ernst Freidrich Schumacher released in 1973. The book comprises a collection of essays, which reframe and reposition macroeconomics thinking at a critical juncture. The timing of the book could not have been more dramatic as it was released during the energy crisis of 1973, which served to strongly underpin its key message.

Schumacher's book was an early attempt to combine ethics, human consideration, philosophy, environmentalism and economics. The book sounded a warning at a time when mass production was deemed ready to produce cheaper goods for ever expanding audiences.

While the early part of the book focuses on the 'problem of production', arguing against the unsustainable nature of the modern economy and the non-renewable consumption of resources, writing that would still be applicable today, the latter part offers fascinating insights about the role of humans. Schumacher contested that the emerging development trends would dehumanise people and the economic and environmental systems that steered their lives. Accordingly, he argued for small 'appropriate technologies' that could empower and involve people rather than the massive production systems.

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 current 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>. See Darren's background summary at the end of this article.

People in organisations

Schumacher asserted that modern organisations adopted a machine metaphor that trivialised individuals, making them feel like a mechanical part of a massive production line. Mass production also removed the need for craft skills, thereby eliminating the role of specialists, as well as their judgements and human relationships. He also warned that economic systems were subject to a similar trend, which prioritised profits over people. Only a return to a people-centred economy, in his view, would enable the long-term development of environmental and human sustainability.

The book strongly and repeatedly asserts that human happiness is not a function of increased wealth. Participation in decisions, relationships and recognition are crucially important in framing the position of individuals and their willingness to participate. The idea of harking back to village-based economy was probably released before its time, but the messages of avoiding ‘gigantism’ and going back to the human scale still run true. In particular, his warning about the result of ignoring people, translating into increased episodes of depression, anxiety and stress and the need to re-position people at the centre of our endeavours now seem to be acutely prophetic. In 1995, the *Times Literary Supplement* ranked *Small is Beautiful* amongst the 100 most influential books published since the Second World War. A recent re-reading confirms that the book still has a lot to offer those concerned with both people and planet and the ultimate balance with profit.

People matter

The shift to considering human participants characterises recent thinking in many disciplines including design and development. Ideas such as social entrepreneurship, open innovation, co-production and co-creation redefine the way organisations interact with individuals. Indeed, organisations are assessing their relationships with customers, employees, suppliers, partners, competitors, and other stakeholders and re-creating the supply chains to build better and more engaged partnerships. Others involve additional groups in defining and refining products and experiences by bringing them into the process of value creation.

The benefits of wider involvement include reduced risks, responsiveness to opportunities, transformed development practices and management processes, design of compelling new products and engaging new experiences, increased loyalty and empowerment.

Re-organising around people opens the potential to re-consider the role of project participants in the definition and execution of projects. This suggests a potential shift for project research and thinking from focusing on the project as the unit of analysis, evident in the early days of project management, to consideration of the project manager, evident over the last two decades, and now to contemplating the role and influence of team members. It also chimes with the ideas of identifying stakeholders and their influence, and determining the potential blockages that impact change in organisational settings. Rethinking the role of participants and players can thus

emphasise the influence and power that they hold, against the organisational structures and obstacles highlighted by Schumacher in his 1973 book.

Behaviour in projects

This month's article 'Successful Projects and the Eight Compelling Behaviours', by Martin Price builds on the theme that people matter. Project management methodologies, tools and procedures seem unable to deliver successful projects and Martin contends that they fail to acknowledge the role of team members. Moreover, given that projects are social endeavours, they require a new approach to build the resilience and capability required for successful delivery. In order to embrace and adopt pragmatism, Martin offers a 'methodology of compelling behaviour'; a comprehensive framework designed to improve human and organisational facets of managing projects.

The article builds on Martin's book *The Single-Minded Project: Ensuring the Pace of Progress* published by Gower. The book offers an extremely useful distinction between the tools, techniques and methods of project management, and the behaviour of the project's players. Martin asserts that the fate of a project hangs on the behaviour of the players, individually and in groups, which in turn determines the project's *pace of progress*.

The *pace of progress* is a fascinating concept, which relies on players' determination to succeed and the choices they make to progress the work. Pace of progress is not addressed by any of the existing standards or bodies of knowledge but is a powerful idea. Martin explains that it "addresses choices made by a project regime in seeking to satisfy the sense of urgency and need for diligence in achieving its goals" (p. 2), and can be used to drive performance in a constant balance between swiftness and diligence.

The new emphasis put forward by Martin's book makes an important contribution to the discipline by opening a new arena for considering project performance. Given that the behaviour of people, both individually and in a group, can be viewed as the principal drivers of the pace and progress of an initiative, the discourse regarding achievement and success in project delivery needs to consider and encompass the ideas advocated by this work. New approaches to thinking about and measuring engagement, dialogue, experience and collaboration can offer a much-needed new perspective on improvement and achievement.

Coping with pace / From pace to progress

American poet and philosopher, Henry David Thoreau, observed in 1854 "if a man does not keep pace with his companions, perhaps it is because he hears a different drummer. Let him step to the music which he hears, however measured or far away".

Recognising the drumbeats, or the decisions that underpin behaviour, empower individuals and determine the success of the actions completed by project players, requires a new understanding of projects and their rhythms. Our own experience suggests that we can influence our walking progress if we speed up the steps or slow

down the pace. Similarly, harnessing behaviour can impact our level of achievement and the progress we make.

Over forty years ago, Schumacher noted that the performance of organisations depends on the individuals within them. The idea that small is beautiful emphasised the importance of individuals and the ‘appropriate technologies’ that empower them. Appropriate technologies are good enough and fit for purpose to be locally controlled and people-centred. In pursuing projects, we would do well to remember the balance, and acknowledge that projects are implemented by people for people. The temptations of technology and its great power are still alluring, but the greatest power and influence derives from those who guide and influence the behaviour, decisions and progress of projects. Perhaps, we are finally ready to consider people-influenced performance in project-driven endeavours undertaken in a people-centred economy.

References:

Schumacher, E. F. (1973) *Small is Beautiful, the Study of Economics as if People Mattered*, London: Blond & Briggs.

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>. This article is an introduction to the invited paper this month by another Gower author. You can find previously published articles by Prof Dalcher and Gower authors at www.pmworldlibrary.net.

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