

Advances in Project Management Series¹

Exercising Agency - Making a Difference in How Projects Are Initiated

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Defining Agency

The words we use to describe concepts are incredibly important. Our word choices shape not just the meaning we intend to convey, but also the manner in which that meaning is interpreted by the recipient. Using a term like “agency” represents a very specific and nuanced concept about how people interact within their organizations. The word has a number of potential meanings, however, so being clear about the intent underlying how it is being used becomes fairly essential.

For the most part, when we hear the term “agency” we think of someone who does something for somebody else. The most common use in our everyday lives is a firm that provides services to other organizations or individuals, for example an “advertising agency”, a “placement agency” or a “real estate agency.” In legal contexts, agents act for us, as our representative, and are expected to negotiate the best agreement possible for us in representing our interests. In a legal context, we are the “principal” and they are the “agent.” The principal-agent relationship extends the power of the principal to the agent, where commitments made by the agent are binding on the principal. This idea of principal and agent is also the essence of “agency theory,” which has been the basis of a lot of research in organizational development and operations. Agency theory explores what is referred to as the “principal-agent problem”, in which the principal and agent, while in a relationship with each other, also have their own interests that they are also pursuing. All of these represent different variations and nuances of how agency emerges in different contexts.

The meaning of “agency” employed within *Exercising Agency*, however, is slightly different yet again. The term comes from philosophy and sociology, and expresses some important concepts about freedom, will and self-determination. In this context, the focus on agency is less on doing something for someone else (although this can be a factor) so much as understanding the degree to which individuals have the capacity to act independently and make their own free choices. Someone who can be said to act with agency is someone whose actions are self-motivated and directed, rather than being subject to constraint. These constraints could be imposed by others, or by the processes and structures of the organization they work within.

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The Project Shaper Role

In the context of the book, *Exercising Agency: Decision Making and Project Initiation* the agency being exercised is that of the project shaper, the person charged with championing the initiation of a project. This is a role that was originally hypothesized by Mark Winter and Charles Smith, and one that was expanded on in the research represented in the book. In all of the organizations studied, the idea of project shaper was one that was universally present, at least informally. How this role was performed, however, varied considerably, and this is the focus of the book.

For some organizations, the role of project shaper was almost entirely constrained by the processes that existed the organization. In these instances the actions and requirements of the process determined which projects got initiated, and how this occurred. In other organizations, political forces within the organization strongly shaped the project initiation process. In these instances, the actions—and the agency—of the project shaper were largely constrained by the political influence and actions (or neglect) of others.

In a few organizations, however, the most significant influence on decision making effectiveness was the degree to which the person performing the project shaper role acted autonomously, making their own choices and taking their own actions. In other words, effectiveness was a product of the agency of the individual. It was a product of their being willing (and able) to freely act, to set their course and make their own choices about how to guide the project from idea to initiation. The ability to do so was less about the structure of the organization, and more about their abilities and capacity as an individual.

It is this idea of agency that proved the most important and essential concept in the research that led to the book. It was a key determinant in how project initiation decisions were made in a significant number of organizations, but varied in how it was applied. For some participants, agency was the sole influence decision making effectiveness. For others, the exercising of agency was able to compensate for inadequacies and political constraints and challenges within their organizations. And in the rare instances where there actually was effective process in place, agency was constrained as participants voluntarily gave up their capacity to act independently in favour of a consistent, uniform and valued approach.

The Role Of Process

Many organizations indicated that some degree of process governed how project initiation decisions were made. The challenge is that, for most, this process wasn't terribly effective. In fact, only a very few research participants described an initiation process that genuinely worked well. In these instances, the process was not just formal and consistent, but it was also valued. This had an interesting impact on politics and agency, though. In these organizations, politics

was perceived as counterproductive to the effective functioning of the process. What's more, individual respondents indicated that better results were obtained by working through the process, rather than around it. In other words, in the face of good process, politics and agency were both suppressed or constrained.

The challenge is what to do when faced with ineffective process. In a process-based environment, where there are formalized processes in place, the expectation is typically that they will be adhered to. When these processes are not helpful or relevant, however, ineffective decisions result. The right projects don't get initiated, the wrong ones do get started, and the journey from idea to actual agreement that we should do something is long, convoluted and often painful.

The first requirement in getting better decision outcomes in such circumstances is to assess what is going on in the organization. Where there are less effective—or downright ineffective—processes in place, we need to understand the dynamics around how decisions do actually get made. A key area of consideration is the level of formality and the degree of consistency by which the process operates. Formality and consistency are related, but they do not mean the same thing. A process can be informal, and yet consistently and regularly adhered to. At the same time, a formal process can almost never be used, resulting in a process that is chaotic and inconsistent.

We also need to understand how clear the decision making process is, and the criteria that exist in determining how a project should proceed. In the absence of decision making clarity, each opportunity tends to get evaluated on its own merits, in response to varying and inconsistent drivers, without clear indication of who will actually make the decision. Decisions might be made by a single decision maker, or in a committee environment; they might be made in the room, or develop or emerge by osmosis after the proposal for a project has been reviewed.

More importantly, we need to understand what to do when processes have a lack of formality and consistency. Where the process is inconsistently applied and insufficiently formal, this can be compensated for by the individual shaping the project. This effort needs focus on not just negotiating how a particular project will be initiated, but also demonstrating the value and importance of the project under consideration. Particularly useful in establishing credibility in this context is reinforcing the ability, track record, knowledge and expertise of the project shaper supporting the project. The project shaper needs to demonstrate that the due diligence has been performed, relevant criteria have been considered and that there is a track record of performance that demonstrates likely success.

Harder to navigate is a complete absence of process where there is still a stated expectation of decision making formality, or there is over-emphasis on process that doesn't lead to the creation of value. Both of these situations are challenging, although they exist for different reasons. The absence of process clarity means that project shapers are shooting in the dark,

trying to hit a target they can't see. These situations are characterized by a lack of clarity around how the decisions are actually made, and an absence of criteria for the decision itself. What is important to realize is that over-emphasis on process that does not deliver value is often the result of an attempt to avoid decisions, or at least to maintain the freedom to be arbitrary under the guise of process. Both situations are far harder to navigate for the project shaper, and need to be approached with care.

For the project shaper to be successful in navigating an arbitrary or uncertain process environment, they will need to exercise their own influence or agency. This requires careful judgement and consideration of whether they can be successful in doing so. Up-front negotiation can be helpful, but in an arbitrary environment there is a risk that these expectations may still change. Agency can be exercised, working within the process where necessary and outside of it when appropriate, but there needs to be confidence on the part of the project shaper that they can successfully act independently without the fear of undesirable consequences. There will be times when this investment of energy and personal effort will be merited, and there will be circumstances when the potential risks outweigh any likely gains.

The presence of process should lead to a better and more effective approach to project initiation. Better process has been demonstrated to lead to better decisions. Compromised or ineffective process, however, can create significant—and sometimes insurmountable—hurdles. The project shaper needs to approach their role with eyes wide open, serving the needs of the project and organization while still maintaining their own credibility, reputation and ability.

The Role Of Politics

The influence of politics was far greater in a much larger number of organizations. Some research participants described a cooperative and collaborative environment, where project initiation decisions were a product of consultation and consensus amongst managers and executives. By contrast, other participants described the political environment of their organizations as toxic or dysfunctional. As can be expected, a lack of constructive politics resulted in extremely ineffective project initiation decisions. At the same time, even functional political environments had only a moderate impact on decision making effectiveness. Political compromise can conspire to sub-optimize good decisions in favour of consensus and group acceptance.

Looking at project initiation decisions, there is often political influence at play. People have an interest in projects for the capabilities that they enable. Advocating for a project involves gaining support for a specific change in the organization, one that requires buy-in and support. Approval of one project often comes at the expense of another project, one that someone else viewed as being equally (if not more) important. Where there is not formal and clear process in place, the way that these decisions are made is inherently through the use of politics.

The challenge here is that even where politics was viewed as functional and positive, it only produced moderately successful decision making outcomes. Consistently effective decision making outcomes required not only a supportive political environment, but also the positive exercise of agency by someone in the project shaper role. Given that most organizations are inherently political in their project initiation processes, it is important to understand how politics plays a role.

A significant influence on project initiation decisions in environments where politics holds sway is the degree to which political behaviours are positive and functional. In such an environment, extensive consultation and collaboration is the norm. Ideas are socialized, views and perspectives are sought, support is weighed and the degree to which favourable opinion exists is carefully calculated. Political decision making environments that are functional work through consensus and mutual support; for a project to move forward, it has to be collectively viewed as valued and worthwhile.

The role of the project shaper is an extremely important one in a political environment. There needs to be a clear champion of the potential project. This is someone whose role is to actually introduce and socialize the idea, who engages in consultation and advocates for the value and relevance of the opportunity that the project makes possible. Where decision making effectiveness is higher in project initiation decisions, this is a formal one, where it is fully expected that someone should be shaping the project.

Finally, the personal influences of the individual performing the project shaper role also make a difference. Unlike in process-based environments, where reputation, credibility and a track-record of performance were valued, here what needs to be emphasized are—perhaps unsurprisingly—political factors. The project shaper must be someone who engages in proactive communication, possesses political savvy and leverages relationships in order to secure support for the project.

Caution needs to be exercised in political environments where the nature of the politics is dysfunctional or obstructive. In dysfunctional environments, constructive political behaviours are not present. Instead, people are seeking their own advantage and furthering their own agenda, at the expense of others or the organization itself. In this situation, it is difficult—and at times quite dangerous—to be advocating for project initiation decisions. Where the project is not seen to further, or is counter to, the desired agenda of powerful political players, the project—and by extension the champion of the project—could well be challenged.

As well, where the project shaper role is informally recognized, it is more difficult to hold sway and gain effective decisions in political environments. The risk is that the project shaper becomes viewed as another political player, furthering the agenda of advocating their project at the expense of some other project or person. Caution needs to be exercised in determining

whether to engage with the organization and act independently in such situations. Individuals need to carefully assess their likelihood of success, and the consequences of potential failure.

Politics is the dominant means by which projects are initiated in the majority of organizations. In a functional political organization, the project shaper is often a valued role where a person is seen as advocating for and guiding the discussion around an individual project opportunity. In dysfunctional environments, however, the project shaper runs the risk of being just another political opponent. Proceed with caution in such circumstances.

The Influence Of Agency

Politics and process play a role in organizations, and they manifested different degrees of influence in how project initiation decisions were made. What was most significant, however, was that of agency. The willingness, ability and freedom of those in the project shaper role to act in support of their project could, on its own, result in effective decisions. More importantly, the agency of those in the project shaper role was also able to compensate for political environments that were only moderately effective, helping these organizations to still make effective decisions. Even in dysfunctional environments, agency could make some difference, although care and caution was required in determining when and how agency was exercised.

In endeavouring to create an environment that produces consistently effective project initiation decisions, the influences of process, politics and agency are not mutually exclusive. There is an interaction between each of these dimensions that helps determine how well decisions do in fact get made:

- Where process works, the very consistency and rigour that makes process effective also constrains the relevance of agency. Actors who theoretically should have a great deal of organizational influence and autonomy willingly give up their freedom where process is seen to produce better results.
- Politics can be partly effective on its own, but is most consistently successful in supporting project initiation decisions when augmented by the influence of agency by the project shaper. Agency is able to compensate for political challenges and overcome inadequacies and organizational dysfunctions in securing better decisions.
- Agency can have influence on its own, but requires a strong and capable project shaper who is willing to act alone in order to further the interests of the organization, particularly where neither politics nor process are seen to be effective.

Effective project initiation decisions are influenced by process, politics and agency. While these forces can act in isolation, they more typically interact with each other. The influence of one force can augment, compromise or constrain the actions of the others. What is important in all

of this is the insight that this research has provided in helping those who support the initiation process to help make better decisions. Doing so requires an accurate assessment of the organizational environment, a sense of our own individual capabilities, and a willingness and determination to act at all times in the best interests of the project and the organization.

In performing the project shaper role, it can be argued that a person is acting on behalf of another, and working to further the interests of the organization. In the research, this was unquestionably the case. What was particularly important in how participants exercised agency was that they did so not to benefit themselves, but to ensure that a good decision was made on behalf of the organization. It is not the power of the individual, or the idea of a principal-and-agent relationship, that is key here. Agency is the degree to which project shapers are able and willing to independently act to get a project approved, working within, around or despite the structure and politics of their organization. What makes agency such a powerful concept is the idea that we as individuals can and do make a meaningful difference. Outside of—and often despite—power, politics and process, it is our own sense of self and our willingness to make choices that ultimately makes the most significant difference in how projects get started.

About the Author



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Mark Mullaly is a well-respected facilitator, speaker, consultant and researcher - one of the foremost experts in organizational project management in North America. Recently Mark was co-lead investigator of the research project 'Understanding The Value Of Project Management' - sponsored in part by PMI, this was the largest research to date in the field of project management and has provided valuable insight into how project management delivers value to organizations.

Mark is a senior management consultant with over 25 years of experience in a wide range of industries, including information technology, communications, utilities, oil & gas, engineering, construction, finance, insurance, the arts and research & development. Mark works with private and public sector organizations, teams and individuals around the world to develop effective strategic plans, make effective strategic decisions and solve complex and uncertain problems.

To learn more about Mark's work, visit <http://markmullaly.com/>

To learn more about his book, *Exercising Agency*, [click here](#).