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The Project Manager as a Tightrope Walker
by Douglas G. Long & Ngaire E. Hunt
Series Article

Advances in Project Management Series[1]

The Project Manager as a tightrope walker: dealing ethically with all affected parties

By **Douglas G. Long, PhD and Ngaire E. Hunt, RN, PMP**

Depending on the role held by a project manager, there appear to be three possible scenarios in which potential exists for ethics conflict:

- If they are a vendor based PM:
  - how to implement the project to the benefit of the vendor
  - how to implement the project to the benefit of the customer

- If they are an organisational based PM
  - how to implement the project to the benefit of the organisation
  - how to manage the internal stakeholders expectations and knowledge requirements (as the PM may be provided information which is confidential or in more detail than that of other stakeholders or team members)
  - how to manage / involve the vendor PM (if a vendor is involved)

- If they are a contracted PM
  - how to implement the project to the benefit of the customer
  - how to manage the internal stakeholders expectations and knowledge requirements (as the PM may be provided information which is confidential or in more detail than that of other stakeholders or team members)
  - how to manage / involve the vendor PM (if a vendor is involved)
  - how to implement the project to the benefit of themselves and the contracting company (if used)

These can arise because:

- Multiple stakeholders will have different, and competing sets of priorities.

- There might also be a distinction between the customer and other stakeholders.

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[1]*The PMWJ Advances in Project Management series includes articles by authors of program and project management books published by Gower in the UK and by Routledge worldwide. To view project management books published by Routledge publishers, click here. See this month's author profiles at the end of this article.*

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- There might be tensions between the priorities of the project manager, and those of the different groups of stakeholders and also the clients.

In this article Douglas Long and Ngaire Hunt explore the application of *The Ethical Kaleidoscope*[2] as a tool for assisting project managers confront and deal ethically with conflicting project-owner demands faced in their work. By utilising the lens nominated in the model we seek to provide support to project managers no matter whether vendor based, organisational based, or contracted.

The Ethical Kaleidoscope is a construct developed by Douglas Long and Zivit Inbar to assist boards of organisations – large or small, public or private, government or non-government, for-profit or not-for-profit – to operate in ways that meet not only legal requirements but also to operate in ways that are dealing ethically with all affected parties. In their research leading to the book (interviews with the Chairs of some 130 organisations in Australia, New Zealand, and the USA), Long and Inbar found that the main emphasis at a corporate governance level related primarily to the legality of activities with any ethical considerations often relegated to a very poor secondary or tertiary position of, very often, only cursory concern. The result is that, even when an organisation has a clear and published code of ethics (as was the case for many of those studied), the incidence of organisations behaving badly occurs far too frequently.

Fig 1. The Ethical Kaleidoscope:

Reproduced from "The Ethical Kaleidoscope: Values, Ethics, and corporate Governance" by permission
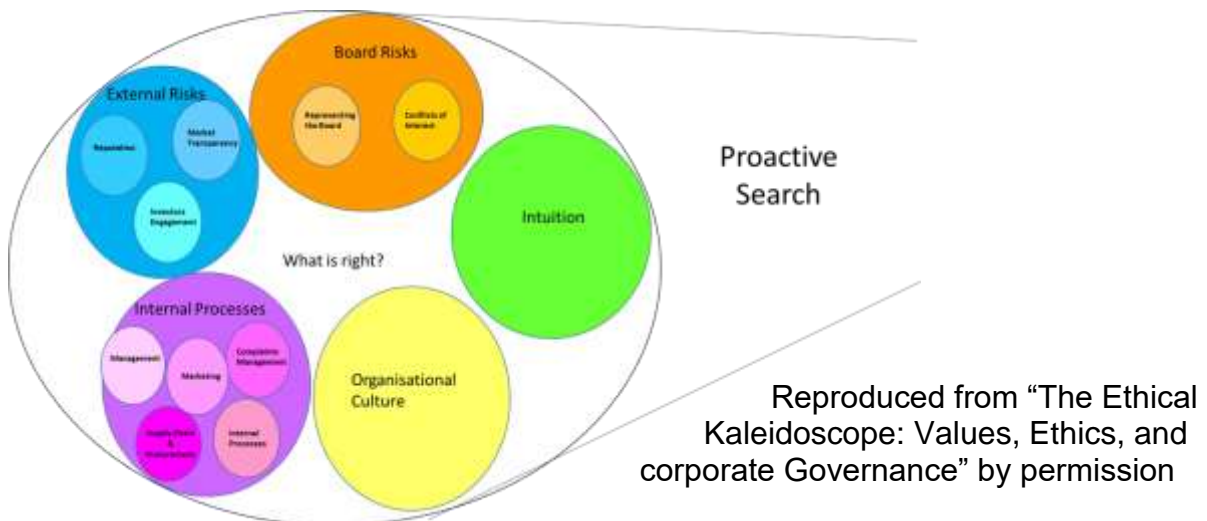
Although the model nominates the lens as being Intuition, Board Risks, External Risks, Internal Processes, and Organisational Culture, at least one lens is capable of being relabelled if the kaleidoscope is being used by parties other than the board.

Applying this model to the role of the project manager, we suggest that the lens through which the project manager considers their ethical obligations should be:

[2] Long, Douglas G & Inbar, Zivit *The Ethical Kaleidoscope: Values, Ethics, and Corporate Governance,* 2016, Routledge Press, UK

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- Organisational Intuition
- Organisational Risks
- External Risks
- Internal Processes
- Organisational Culture

Organisational Intuition

One of the Chairs interviewed by Long and Inbar commented that, long before he was able to show that an ethical issue existed and that the board needed to act, he had 'a gut feeling' that something was 'not quite right'. It was this 'gut feeling' that prompted him to further investigations. Other chairs admitted to having similar 'feelings about the ethical correctness of something' yet went on to say that, once they had ascertained the activity was legal, they took no further action.

As a Project Manager (PM), Ngaire Hunt has sometimes felt that something was "off" with either the progression of the project or that a Stakeholder group may be affected (either positively or negatively) by continuing the current course of the project. "It's at that moment, I as the PM have choices - do I sit by and continue the current course? Do I review the project charter and scope to understand if the project is on the right track or do I raise my "off" feeling to the Project Steering Committee (PSC) to reference that there may be an ethical issue with the current course? In my experience, I have found that reviewing the charter and scope while wearing an ethical lens from the view of the stakeholder group that I am concerned about, enables me to raise any potential ethical risks to the PSC for appropriate course corrections."

If a person clearly understands and is committed to the ethics of one's profession then a finely tuned values set can often provide an early indicator of potential problems long before any tangible evidence appears. How finely tuned is your values meter? Do you listen to your ethical intuition? If your intuitive concerns are then corroborated by facts, what action do you take?

Organisational Risks

Every project has an economic and social impact on the organisation. Sometimes the impact can be so great that project failure could have seriously adverse effect on the organisation's viability: Others, of course, may have more of an impact on the project champion's ego than on organisational sustainability but both economic issues and ego need to be considered.

In July 2016 the Australian Federal Government introduced data matching software to ascertain eligibility of people to receive various social benefits. The philosophy behind the project was (and is) sound – to ensure that those people eligible for support receive that to which they are entitled and that the social welfare system is not rorted. However, as the project has been rolled out towards the end of 2016 and into 2017 it is clear that, despite the protestations from various Ministers of the Crown and Departmental Heads, the system has serious

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ethical and practical flaws and urgent remedial attention is required. Quite clearly only the needs of the government have been taken into account with the needs of those affected being written off as of little or no real importance. As at the time of writing it appears as though the egos of politicians and senior public servants are trumping other concerns with the result that a long-term impact of refusal to listen to public and media feedback and to correct identified problems may be the non-re-electability of the present government should it be decided to call an election in the relatively near future.

When considering organisational risks, does the project manager consider not just the short term future but also the far more complex medium to long term impact of the project on both the organisation per se and on the project champions? How do you manage this – especially if you have had no involvement in the project planning phase? At what point in the implementation process do you provide project reports that include cost-benefit analyses broader than simply a question of economics? What do you do when the project owner refuses to listen to (or otherwise ignores) your feedback?

External Risks

As already indicated, the reputation of both the organisation and the project champions can be at risk in a project. However there may also be more direct external risks. For example when working on a project which potentially impacts the lives of everyday people, one of the risks is that if it is implemented differently at each of the affected sites, the end result may vary with the success of the project due to the amount of time taken by each of the sites to achieve the desired outcome. How does the project manager ensure that there is consistency of approach and outcomes for each of the sites? Ngaire fondly remembers a case where each site had a dedicated project team, which could draw on the knowledge and experience of both the originating project team as well as others that were implementing at the same time. This enabled external risks to be assessed and managed effectively and with a high level of consistency across all sites.

How frequent and effective is your monitoring of external risks? Is the sharing of information full and open or (all too often because of ego and/or power and control issues) is there a tendency to operate on a strict "need to know" basis in which some teams are left to second guess what might have happened elsewhere?

Internal Processes

Almost always projects impact on one or more of the internal processes of an organisation – management, procurement, marketing, service, etc.

Sometimes, in the planning stage, inadequate attention has been given to the symbiotic relationship necessary between these especially when implementing a brand new methodology in which, as the methodology develops and is expanded

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and refined, the steps required to effectively implement also change. All information pertaining to such changes needs to be mapped and explained, with all the pieces of the puzzle being shown in their interconnectivity, to enable the methodology and process to be understood and followed. If this is incomplete, then the associated project teams implementing the new methodology may be unable to ensure that the processes they are following are as they should be now (rather than as they were previously planned) and what they are likely to be as the project moves to future stages.

How compartmentalised is the organisation and the project? Do different areas jealously guard their way of doing things? Can you easily get the information you need? Do you readily share, in a way that others can understand, the information you have? Do you update "the big picture" as well as the composite pieces?

Organisational Culture

Different organisational cultures necessitate differing approaches. No two cultures are identical (although there may be many similarities) and such differences present a range of ethical issues. Following the (government) forced merger of three retail electricity suppliers it became clear that some 1,500 staff would be surplus to requirements once the transition was completed. This decision was made despite the board knowing that the needs of the owners (the government), the organisation, the employees, and customers were different and, in some instances, opposing. In this instance the Chair and Chief Executive were staunch believers in very open communication and ensured this news was given to every employee. They emphasised that the end result was a given but that the process to this result was open to discussion and input from all affected parties.

Two years later the project was completed on-time, within budget, and with no industrial unrest or customer complaints about service. Past employees still speak positively about their previous employer and the way the project was managed. All too often organisations try to keep information sharing to a minimum. How does the project manager handle these two extremes (or anything in between) especially if the rumour mill is actually accurate but the organisation doesn't want the truth to be known? Where is the dividing line between a functional and dysfunctional organisational culture in relation to project implementation? How does the project manager handle any conflict between their own value set and the restrictions imposed by management?

When a young boy, Douglas Long was given a toy that enthralled him. It looked like a short telescope but, rather than only expanding to change focus, it also had a rotating body that, as one moved it, enabled a variety of different patterns to be seen. Only when the full range of colours and patterns had been viewed was the picture again able to be seen in its entirety. In the intervening time the viewer could see only aspects of the picture through different colours and different patterns. It was a kaleidoscope.

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As a project manager you have an extremely important role to fulfil. All too often the pressures you face can seduce you into maintaining relatively narrow focus on what is necessary in order to bring the project in on time and within budget. You are, if you like, operating with a telescope that enables both short and long focus as necessary.

Sometimes, however, you also need a kaleidoscope – a tool for looking for maintaining the same focus but looking at it through a range of different colours and patterns. The Ethical Kaleidoscope is designed to help you do just that: never lose sight of the big picture but also use the different lens to maximise the probability that you are considering the broadest possible range of complexities. A tightrope walker needs to proceed along the length of the rope while maintaining balance amid a variety of external forces. Project managers need many tightrope walker skills!

In summary, the role of project management is both essential and complex. Ethical issues are often hidden and very hard to read. Using The Ethical Kaleidoscope can help project managers ensure they consider and confront the complexity of ethical considerations necessary for performance that not only meets organisational requirements but also that is in full accord with the profession's own code of ethics.

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Douglas G. Long teaches values, ethics and leadership at the School of Business, University of New South Wales, Sydney. From 1988 to 2000 he was associated with Macquarie Graduate School of Management in Sydney, where he researched, designed and delivered the programme Leadership in Senior Management. His latest book (with Zivit Inbar) *The Ethical Kaleidoscope: Values, Ethics, and Corporate Governance* has just (2017) been released by Routledge. Two of his previous books, *Delivering High Performance: The Third Generation Organisation* and *Third Generation Leadership and the Locus of Control: Knowledge, Change and Neuroscience*, were published by Gower. For the past 40 years he has been teaching, consulting, and public speaking in Australia, New Zealand, Papua New Guinea, South East Asia, Europe, and the USA. He holds the degree of PhD in Organisational Psychology.

Click here to learn more about Dr. Long's book, *The Ethical Kaleidoscope: Values, Ethics, and Corporate Governance, published in December 2016 by Gower / Routledge.*

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Ngaire E. Hunt, RN, PMP commenced her career in nursing and qualified as a NZRN. She then worked as a Registered Nurse in New Zealand and the UK, before returning to New Zealand and moving into management of nursing services. In 2008 she shifted her career to project management and worked, primarily in health related fields, as a project manager in New Zealand until 2015. In 2015 she moved to Australia and, since then, has been working as a project manager in a health related consultancy in Melbourne. She holds her PMP qualification.