

## **Some conflict-related situations between parties to projects**

By Alan Stretton

### **INTRODUCTION**

In a recent article in this journal (Stretton 2017d) I observed that current bodies of knowledge and similar guidelines largely focus on projects with relatively low complexities. Whilst there have been some contributions on the management of projects with relatively high levels of complexity in the more general project management literature, there are still many gaps, and much more is needed to cover the very wide range of various types of project complexity that exist in practice.

Another type of complexity-related situation which is not well covered in the literature is that related to conflicts between various parties to projects. Conflicts can be seen as specific types of complexities, as is exemplified by Wagner & Lock 2016, who say

Team dynamics and conflicts are perceived as complexities that project or programme managers need to deal with.

I have come across three articles in relatively recent times which have been concerned with three different types of conflict-related situations. One was by Taggart 2015 (also in this journal), who discussed significant “clashes of cultures” between supplier organizations and owner organizations. A second was by Crawford et al 2013, which was concerned with a range of tensions at the interfaces of temporary (i.e. project) organisations and permanent organizations in disaster event situations – in this case three state-level Australian bushfire fighting organizations and operations. The third was an article by Arroyo & Grisham 2016 (again in this journal), on leading what they describe as extreme projects – i.e. those conducted in demanding physical, political, multi-cultural, multi-country, multi-organizational global environments. They discuss a very substantial range of conflict-related issues.

The types of project contexts of each of these three, the parties involved, and the nature of the conflicts, are all very different, as are the lessons that two authors groups draw from these. However, there was one common strand. The authors found little in the existing project management bodies of knowledge and the like to help them solve their particular conflict-related problems. There were also some other issues that emerged in the different contexts of the three articles, two of which are quite rich in context-relevant materials.

We now discuss each of the above three articles in a little more detail.

## **CONFLICTS BETWEEN OWNER AND SUPPLIER ORGANIZATIONS**

Taggart 2015 points out that owner organizations are permanent institutions, whereas supplier organizations' projects are temporary organisations. With regard to soft skills in particular, he sees project managers in supplier organizations as standing astride a fault line between two very different cultures, with different

- attitudes to change
- importance of individual customer focus
- appropriateness of rule based governance
- importance of stability of numbers
- appropriateness of different incentives
- importance of job security
- terms of engagement
- favoured attributes of employees
- favoured attributes of employers
- prioritisation of efficiency over effectiveness
- and many more

He points out that the literature on project management offers scant advice for identifying and dealing with these cultural conflicts.

My position is that, without any specifics of the situations reflected in Taggart's observations, it is difficult for me to comment. In my own experience these types of problems have either not been important, or have been relatively easily overcome, and only seldom of unusual significance. Perhaps this is because I was operating in the age-old building and construction domain, rather than in newer domains where participants had less prior interactive experience to fall back on. However, I found some other types of differences for project managers working in project supplier and project owner organizations, which I discussed in Stretton 2017e & 2017h.

## **TENSIONS BETWEEN THE PERMANENT AND PROJECT ORGANIZATIONS THAT RESPOND TO DISASTROUS EVENTS**

Crawford et al 2013 have developed substantial detailed information about tensions between permanent and project organizations in relation to disaster events, specifically in the context of three fire authorities in three Australian states – Victoria, New South Wales, and Queensland – as now discussed.

Crawford et al first describe the three fire authorities in some detail. All three are primarily concerned with rural/regional fire and emergency services (although the Queensland RFS also has a formal connection to the urban fire response service). The high-level organisation structures are very similar across the three authorities.

In each case the permanent organisation is responsible for strategic and detailed planning, provision and maintenance of equipment, as well as communication and coordination with a complex arrangement of stakeholders..... The permanent organisation also maintains and mobilised the volunteers into temporary or project organisations to respond to disastrous events.

The tensions identified between the permanent and temporary organisations, in order of prevalence, were as follows.

- **Time:** Time based planning in reference to the term of the project versus the periodic planning cycles for permanent organisations.
- **Identity and identification of employees in terms of belonging to the permanent or temporary organisation:** The permanent organisation is routine focused, and the temporary organisation capability focused. Members of each have tensions about their ability to be valuable to the other type of organisation.
- **Access to critical resources:** i.e. specialists, mechanical resources, and information.
- **Learning boundaries:** Transferring knowledge and results from projects to the permanent organisation.
- **Size and complexity of an organisation:** Clarity of organisational roles and responsibility demarcation for temporary and permanent organisation.
- **Detachment challenge:** For the temporary organisation from external elements such as customer demands, and negotiations with suppliers or financiers.
- **Relationships and heterogeneity of individuals:** Due to diversity in functional background, or emotional tensions.
- **Task or process related differences:** Concerning which actions and tasks will enable the meeting of the organisations objectives.

Crawford et al discussed the following implications of their study for project management.

- Acceptance of and effective balancing of organisational paradoxes between the permanent and temporary organisations such as rigidity and flexibility, centralisation and decentralisation, routine focus and capability focus.
- Codification and standardization of repetitive aspects of project work both within and between organizations, facilitating the sharing of personnel to augment resources when required.
- Critical awareness of the time considerations required for temporary organizations to be successful.
- Use of a decentralised model of operating for temporary organizations operating in task repetitive, highly emergent environments.
- Full commitment to the transfer of knowledge and results from projects to the permanent organization, and the willingness to examine and where appropriate implement lessons learned from briefings, reviews and inquiries as well as from other organizations.
- Permanent organization support for temporary organization activity both during and between projects (incidents) by developing capability, ensuring sufficient adequately trained resources are available for projects when required, engaging stakeholders, building trust, and transferring knowledge.

Crawford et al go on to point out that making too many rules can have a detrimental effect on the ability to deliver complex projects. They saw this as also reflected in Winter et al 2006, who say that practice based knowledge is bounded by its contextual nature, where actors apply their own implicit rules in combination with the external ones explicated in manuals and processes.

## **CONFLICT-RELATED ISSUES WITH EXTREME PROJECTS**

Arroyo & Grisham 2016 describe extreme projects as those conducted in demanding physical, political, multi-cultural, multi-country, multi-organizational global environments. They list examples of conflict-related issues on extreme projects as follows.

- JV or alliance partners with different goals and objectives
- Suppliers and vendors with questionable ethics and hidden agendas
- The importance of effective logistics
- The need for political fluency and competence
- The need for cultural fluency and competence
- The need for strong leadership
- The need for multi-disciplinary teams, and interdisciplinary leadership
- The importance of principled leadership
- A strong understanding of local communities and societies
- A lack of infrastructure
- A lack of operational monitoring and financial control
- Poor communications
- A lack of concern for the environment

Arroyo & Grisham consider it critically important to lead projects from conceptualisation, through design and construction, and into operations, utilising what they call Collaborative Project Enterprises (CPEs).

A CPE is naturally constructed of diverse interdisciplinary teams with a variety of organizational goals. ....

The CPE leader in such cases has little contractual authority over most, if not all, of the organizations .....

Thus the challenge is to inspire the desire for people to follow because of the characteristics, and behaviour of the leader.

Arroyo & Grisham emphasise that the above is not hypothetical, but that they have seen people pull together such diverse teams and lead them towards a common goal as if they were members of the same organization. Evidently they have a series of Case Studies to support their findings.

## **DISCUSSION**

The above summarised descriptions of conflict-related situations in the project context cover three quite different types of project situations, and of parties to these projects, and are correspondently different in content and emphases. However, there is a common attribute which all three share.

We started with Taggart 2015, who lists some ten examples of what he calls a “clash of cultures” between supplier organizations (SO) and owner organizations (OO). In this context, he says,

Achieving an accommodation between these two cultures is not straightforward but I believe it is of paramount importance in determining the success or otherwise of SO. I further believe that practitioners are poorly served by the literature on project management, which offers scant advice for identifying and dealing with these cultural conflicts.

In a footnote, Taggart notes that the issue of cultural clashes is not articulated in the PMBOK Guide 5<sup>th</sup> Edition (PMI 2013).

Turning to Crawford et al 2013, their concerns were with tensions at the interface of permanent organizations and temporary organizations (i.e. projects), in the context of three Australian state rural/regional fire and emergency services. These have been described as high reliability organizations (HROs), in the sense of having performance reliability as their primary goal. The authors comment as follows.

The HRO concept of ‘underspecification of structures’ may provide some insight into the way Project Management uses the various bodies of knowledge and potentially, where appropriate, the implementation of methodologies. Shenhar and Dvir [2007:7] address this and say “Although the conventional project management body of knowledge forms a good foundation for basic training and initial learning, it may not suffice for addressing the complex problems of today’s projects”. In this, a commonly espoused weakness in the project management community is the inability to accept the Bodies of Knowledge (or prescribed methodologies) as scalable guiding principles.

Prieto 2015:119 has expressed the sense of the last sentence of this quotation a little more robustly, as follows (his emphases).

Large complex projects differ from those that comprise the traditional domain of projects as defined and served by the Project Management Institute and its Project Management Body of Knowledge (PMBOK). Remember its admonishment that PMBOK provides a management framework for **most projects, most of the time**. Large complex projects appear to live outside these boundary conditions.

Finally, we looked at what Arroyo & Grisham 2016 had to say on leading what they describe as extreme projects – i.e. those conducted in demanding physical, political, multi-cultural, multi-country, multi-organizational global environments. They listed some thirteen conflict-related issues, which are broadly a mixture of interdisciplinary skills, politics, cross-cultural conflicts, language barriers, social issues, and the like.

Arroyo & Grisham consider it critically important to lead projects throughout, utilising what they call Collaborative Project Enterprises (CPEs).

We suggest in a global economy that the CPE leader must be curious, open-minded, compassionate, adaptable, and able to inspire the desire of the CPE stakeholders to follow her or him. ....  
80 to 90% of the skills needed are interpersonal in nature, not technical, and not process.

The last sentence is a particularly revealing one, as the majority of the skills required are far removed from technical and process skills. This pretty much confirms what all three author groups have indicated, namely that they get little, if any help, from the standard project management literature with regard to techniques for conflict resolution, in spite of the fact that this is a key element in their work.

Whilst there is nothing particularly new about this recognition, it still seems to be substantially ignored in some sections of the project management community, which was one of my motivations for writing this article. Another was that the latter two author groups have given us very substantial checklists in relation to their conflict situations, which I thought merited further exposure to potentially interested parties.

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## About the Author



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