A commentary on strategy formulation-related causes of "project" failures in an organisational strategic context[1]

By Alan Stretton

INTRODUCTION

In a recent article in this journal (Stretton 2018k) I discussed causes of so-called "project" failures in an organisation strategic management context. It was found that over a half of these failures (which were mainly derived from Jenner 2015) were not directly attributable to project management per se, but to other entities, including top-level strategic and/or general management, strategic portfolio management, and particularly directors and/or managers responsible for strategy development.

Additionally, with only two partial exceptions, these causes of failure were primarily related to post-strategy formulation stages of organisational strategic management. In an earlier article in this journal (Stretton 2015a) I had identified some causes of "project" failure, additional to those in Stretton 2018k, which were particularly relevant to strategy formulation. This article comments on some aspects of these additional causes of failure.

But we start with the organisational strategic management framework to which these causes of failure relate.

WHY USE AN ORGANISATIONAL STRATEGIC MANAGEMENT FRAMEWORK?

The strategic framework I am using is from Stretton 2018k, shown in Figure 1 below.

STRAGEGY FORMULATION	STRATEGY DEVELOPMENT		STRATEGY EXECUTION	
1. Establish strategic objectives	2. Develop options, evaluate, choose best	3. Augment/consolidate chosen strategic initiative(s)	4. Execute strategic initiatives	5. Achieve strategic objectives.
Establish/ re-establish the desired deliberate/ emergent strategic outcomes and benefits	Develop alternative strategic initiatives to achieve strategic outcomes / benefits. Evaluate alternatives. Choose best option(s)	Augment and elaborate chosen strategic option(s). Confirm feasibilities Prioritise and consolidate into strategic portfolio(s).	Execute projects/ programs and *other strategic work* to facilitate achievement of strategic objectives	Achieve strategic outcomes and realise benefits

Figure 1: The organisational strategic management framework from Stretton 2018k

The main reason I have been using an organisational strategic management framework to discuss causes of "project" failures is that it provides a context which appears to be relevant to most projects, irrespective of their type, origins, application area, etc. My reasoning has always been that projects are means to help the achievement of broader ends (e.g. Stretton 2016b,c,d,e).

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Broader ends can be hugely variable, but if we represent them as an organisation's (or equivalent body's) strategic objectives, we appear to be covering most, if not all, types of broader ends. In associating projects with organisational strategic objectives, I have argued previously (e.g. Stretton 2017k) that, no matter how projects originate – i.e. whether in deliberate or emergent ways – sooner or later they become integral components of organisational strategic plans, and of their execution. The strategic framework is not a static one. In allowing for the addition of emergent strategic initiatives, the organisation's strategies can, and should be, changed to respond appropriately to emergent factors in an increasingly dynamic external environment

THE STRATEGIC FRAMEWORK AND CAUSES OF "PROJECT" FAILURE

In Figure 2 below I have abbreviated the strategic management framework of Figure 1 to its headings. Against this I have summarised the causes of failure listed by Jenner 2015, which were discussed in some detail in Stretton 2018k. I have added causes of failure from Stretton 2015a which most directly relate to *Strategy formulation*. These are indicated by solid bullet points. The hollow bullet points indicate additional causes I want to discuss.

<table>
<tr><td colspan="5">Top-level strategic management causes of failure (2 causes)
Top-level general management causes of failure (2 causes)</td></tr>
<tr><td>STRAGEGY FORMULATION</td><td colspan="2">STRATEGY DEVELOPMENT</td><td colspan="2">STRATEGY EXECUTION</td></tr>
<tr><td>1. Establish strategic objectives</td><td>2. Develop options, evaluate, choose best</td><td>3. Augment/consolidate chosen strategic initiative</td><td>4. Execute strategic initiatives</td><td>5. Achieve strategic objectives.</td></tr>
<tr><td>Additional causes of failure related to strategy formulation

Lack of effective engagement with stakeholders causes
○ Identifying external stakeholders
• No owner/user involvement (3)
• Changing sponsor strategy
• Poor sales/marketing links

Unrealistic cost estimates and/ or benefits forecasts causes
• Unrealistic expectations (3)
• Unclear success criteria
• Overzealous advocacy
• Funding difficulties

Other external causes
• Adverse geophysical conditions
• Inflation
• Poor political environment (2)
○ Political hubris
○ Other formulation-related causes</td><td colspan="2">Strategy development causes of failure
(7 causes, including the two bullet-pointed below, which are also relevant to Strategy formulation)

▪ Lack of effective engagement with stakeholders

• Unrealistic cost estimates and/or benefits forecasts</td><td colspan="2">Strategic portfolio management (1 cause)
Project management (3 causes)
Transition management (1cause)</td></tr>
</table>

Figure 2: Adding Strategy Formulation-related causes of failure to a summary of Jenner's causes of failure

I had some difficulty finding a satisfactory way of grouping the causes of failure which appear to most directly relate to *Strategy formulation*. I think the main reason is that many of these causes also apply to later stages of the organisational strategic management framework. This is also the case with some of the causes from Jenner 2015 that I listed under Strategy development in Stretton 2018k, particularly *Lack of effective engagement with stakeholders,* and *Unrealistic cost estimates and/or benefits forecasts.*

Both of the latter appeared to me to be very applicable to the *Strategy formulation* stage (as well as execution stages), and I decided to use these as sub-headings to cover several of the causes of failure cited in Stretton 2015a. The remainder appear under the sub-heading *Other external causes* – all as shown in Figure 2.

I will now discuss these additional detailed causes of failure under the above three sub-headings.

LACK OF EFFECTIVE ENGAGEMENT WITH STAKEHOLDERS CAUSES

I will come to the solid bullet-pointed cited causes of failure under this sub-heading shortly. But, we will start with some general observations on this broad group of causes of failure.

The importance of effective stakeholder engagement

Clearly, effective engagement with stakeholders is very important, as the increased attention it has received in the literature in more recent times tends to confirm. Indeed, there is more than enough material on this topic to help guide people in effective stakeholder engagement. For example, in the last issue of this journal alone we have two significant contributions on this subject by Piekara 2018 and Piney 2018. As the latter says, "… a program can only succeed with the active support of key stakeholders".

However, based on my own experiences in the building and construction industries, I suspect that at least some of the lack of stakeholder engagement causes of failure could have arisen through failure to identify key stakeholders in the first place. In practice it is critically important that you identify all relevant stakeholders, for many reasons. But a key defensive reason is that failure to identify just one key adversarial stakeholder can doom a project and its associated strategic initiative to failure. I have not seen any generalised listing of potential external stakeholders, so thought it might be useful to introduce a checklist, as now discussed.

○ *Identifying external stakeholders*

In a recent commentary in this journal (Stretton 2018j), I discussed an article by Pirozzi 2017 on stakeholders, which I then coupled with an earlier article I wrote on the same subject in this journal (Stretton 2014a), to produce some checklists of stakeholders under various categories, including some suggested by Pirozzi.

Figure 3 below is based on these, but they are assembled in a somewhat different format. This table aims to cover most external stakeholders, apart from suppliers and partners.

EXTERNAL INFLUENCERS			

Political/Regulatory Actors
• Governments
• Politicians
• Lobbyists
• NGOs
• Regulatory bodies
• International institutions
• External auditors
 	
Industry Insiders/Outsiders
• Competitors
• Complementors
	Technological Actors
	• Patent offices
	• Universities
	• Research institutes
	• Standardisation bodies
	
	Socio-Cultural Actors
	• Media
	• Communities
	• Opinion leaders
	• Religious organisations
	• Environmentalists
		Economic Actors
		• Tax authorities
		• Central banks
		• Employers federations
		• Unions
		• Stock exchanges
		
		Parasitic Participants
		• Opportunists
		• Activists
		• Causes
		• Intervenor groups
			External champions
			• Entrepreneurs
			• Developers
			• Visionaries
			• Investors
			  ○ Funders
			  ○ Sponsors
			  ○ Shareholders
			
			Purchasers
			• **Owners/users**
			• Customers

Figure 3: A checklist of potential external stakeholders

We now move on to discuss the cited causes of failure under this heading.

- **No owner/user involvement cause of failure**

Owners/users are certainly the most prominent group of stakeholders. Failure to involve them in key decision-making was cited three times in Stretton 2015a as a cause of "project" failure. This is hard to understand. It appears to be an inexplicable and inexcusable abrogation of senior management leadership and strategic responsibility.

I suspect that this type of failure could well indicate that there is a no-one-in-charge situation at key organisational levels. (This type of situation may also, of course, be a contributor to other causes of failure). But, whatever the reason, failure to involve owners/users in key decision-making in strategy formulation and strategic initiatives is an extraordinary dereliction of duty.

- **Changing sponsor strategy**

The sponsor is most certainly a key stakeholder. Changing sponsor strategy would be a problem in any of the five stages of the organisational strategic management framework, but it could well start in the *Strategy formulation* stage. Most of us who have been hands-on project managers will have experienced this in some form or other.

- **Poor sales/marketing links**

Sales and marketing people are often key people in communicating with stakeholders, so that failures in this area would seem to fall into this broader group of causes of failure.

UNREALISTIC COST ESTIMATES AND/OR BENEFITS FORECASTS CAUSES

These types of causes of failure can happen at any stage of the organisational strategic management framework, but all too often make their initial appearance at the *Strategy formulation* stage.

The importance of conceptual level cost estimates and benefits forecasts

Cost estimating is difficult, particularly at the conceptual level. In Stretton 2018e I discussed five types of cost estimates, which were titled *Expert judgement, Analogous, Parametric, Bottom-up*, and *Three-point* estimates. In last month's issue of this journal, Epstein 2018 discussed three levels of estimating accuracy, which he described as *Ballpark estimates, Preliminary estimates*, and *Accurate estimates.* In the *Strategy formulation* stage we are certainly talking about ballpark estimates, which are developed into preliminary estimates in the second stage, and accurate estimates in the third and fourth stages.

In Stretton 2018e I also discussed the importance of getting reliable conceptual level estimates, and some factors mitigating against such reliability, such as the planning fallacy, optimism bias, and guesstimating. Optimism bias is all too frequently evident in both cost estimates and benefits forecasts, and I gave some highly visible examples of this in Australian inner-city toll roads, tunnels and the like, where there is a woefully consistent record of under-estimation of costs, and over-estimation of usage and revenue.

The first three cited causes of "project" failure from Stretton 2015a which appear under the above broad heading are:

- **Unrealistic expectations (3)**
- **Unclear success criteria**
- **Overzealous advocacy**

It would appear that each of these causes fundamentally derives, directly or indirectly, from having unrealistic cost estimates and/or benefits forecasts. Or, putting it the other way round, these cited causes would certainly be less likely to happen if realistic estimates and forecasts had been made, and were available.

We then come to the fourth cause of failure listed in this group.

- **Funding difficulties**

Funding difficulties were also specifically cited in Stretton 2015a. I have included it under this grouping for the simple reason that potential funding organisations will want to see ample evidence of realistic estimates/forecasts before they agree to commit. In spite of its obvious importance, this subject rarely gets the attention it deserves in the project management literature. I hope to make a contribution on this subject from a funding organisation's point of view at some future point.

OTHER STRATEGY FORMULATION-RELATED EXTERNAL CAUSES

The three cited causes of failure under this heading in Figure 1 come from Morris 2013:60, and relate to the findings of Morris & Hough 1987 with regard to major projects. Morris comments (in part) that these findings emphasised

> …the importance of managing the front-end project definition stages of a project, the pivotal role of the owner (or sponsor), and the need to manage, or influence, in some way the project 'externalities" – its context.

The need to manage or influence the externalities lies at the heart of circumventing external causes of failure. There are, of course, a multitude of other potential external causes of failure, and I will be discussing some of these shortly under the heading *Other formulation-related causes.*

- **Adverse geophysical conditions**

This is a somewhat specialised cause of failure, which would appear to most relevant for individual strategic initiatives and their component projects.

- **Inflation**

This cause is more likely to be relevant for longer-term strategic initiatives/projects, and could apply to a wide variety of the latter. It is probably most directly associated with the previous section on unrealistic cost estimates and/or benefits forecasts, and would perhaps be best handled in a risk management context.

- **Poor political environment (2)**

This cause of failure was cited twice in Stretton 2015a, and was associated with very major projects, presumably in countries with substantial political instability. However, there is another politically-related cause of failure which is much closer to home (Australia in this instance). I have called this *political hubris*, as now discussed.

- ***Political hubris***

Australian infrastructure projects, particularly (but by no means confined to) transportation facilities, have a virtually unbroken record of very substantial over-estimation of usage, and under-estimation of final costs. Practically invariably decisions to proceed are made by politicians, who are generally the real cause of failures on these types of projects. As Gittins 2018 (an economics journalist, writing in the *Sydney Morning Herald*) reports,

> It's often too tempting for pollies [politicians] to pick projects according to the votes their announcement is intended to bring, rather than the extent to which the public benefits they bring exceed their costs.

Gittins goes on to record the following from the head of Infrastructure Australia, a body which has a mandate to prioritise and advise on nationally significant infrastructure:

> …too often, we see projects being committed to before a business case has been prepared, a full set of options have been considered, and rigorous analysis of a potential project's benefits and costs has been undertaken.

In Sydney at the present time we have a light rail project which appears to be in dire trouble. As I previously noted in Stretton 2018k, the state political editor of the *Sydney Morning Herald*, Smith 2018 reported recently in relation to this project:

> In February 2014 the *Herald [Sydney Morning Herald]* revealed that a peer review of the business case conducted by Evans & Peck warned that the government had been overly optimistic in its assumptions.

Even worse, Smith recorded that a secret report prepared by the state government's own experts, titled "Lessons for Light Rail", dated February 1, 2016, warned:

> Visions were promoted before understanding the real constraints of the project – the underlying utilities and drainage. The project is then blamed or delayed when it cannot deliver unrealistic expectations.

In a sense, the last sentence of this quotation reflects a situation which is all too familiar to project management people. Failures due to bad decisions by people earlier in the strategic management sequence are too often wrongly blamed on the project itself.

However, with regard to Australian infrastructure projects, the public is well aware of where the blame lies. The real problem is how to stop politicians from repeating what they appear to regard as a virtual entitlement. We have found no answers to date. What some have called *the "edifice" complex* remains alive and well in the Australian political scene.

Evidently, Australia is not unique in this regard. For example, although I have not seen him use this descriptor, *political hubris* is often implicit in many of Flyvbjerg's writings, as for example in Flyvbjerg et al 2003.

- ***Other formulation-related causes***

It should again be emphasised that there are undoubtedly many other external factors in addition to those listed above which could contribute to failure. As far as I can see, it would be virtually impossible to compile a comprehensive list. However, there do appear to be at least two groups of *other formulation-related causes*.

One group can be related to other stakeholders, such as those listed in Figure 3, who may not have been identified elsewhere. This could be a useful checklist for identifying at least some other potential sources of *formulation-related causes* of failure.

As noted earlier, it is important to emphasise that <u>all</u> relevant stakeholders need to be identified, for many reasons. The key defensive reason is that failure to identify potentially adversarial stakeholders who may regard themselves as being adversely affected, and may subsequently exercise their negativity in a tangible way, can doom a project and its associated strategic initiative to failure.

The other group of *formulation-related causes* can be classified, by exception, as not being specifically stakeholder-related. There appear to be two types of such causes. The first type covers causes such as *inflation*, which could be expected to apply to strategic initiatives/ projects at large. The second type covers causes which are specific to individual initiative/ projects, such as *adverse geophysical conditions.*

Either or both of these types of sources of potential causes of failure can often be difficult to identify, but the effort must be made, for the same reasons as previously discussed for stakeholder-related causes.

SUMMARY/DISCUSSION

I initially ventured into this commentary because, in my previous article on responsibilities for "project" successes/failures (Stretton 2018k), the causes of failure, which derived from Jenner 2015, were primarily related to post-*strategy formulation* stages of organisational strategic management. In an earlier article, Stretton 2015a I had identified some additional causes of "project" failure which were particularly relevant to *strategy formulation*, and this article has commented on some aspects of these additional causes of failure.

I first introduced the organisational strategic management framework used in the previous article and pointed out that it is far from being a static framework, as it specifically provides for the addition of emergent strategies, including those developed in response to changes in an increasingly dynamic external environment.

I then briefly summarising the causes of "project" failure from Stretton 2018k in Figure 2, and noted that two of these causes in particular, namely *Lack of effective engagement with stakeholders,* and *Unrealistic cost estimates and/or benefits forecasts,* which I had related particularly to the *Strategy development* stage of the strategic management framework, also applies to the *Strategy formulation* stage (as well as to *Strategy execution*).

I also noted that several of the additional causes of failure from Stretton 2015a which particularly relate to *Strategy formulation* could also be assigned as particular examples of the above two broader causes of failure. I did this in Figure 2, and added a third sub-heading to cover the remaining additional causes previously cited.

I then discussed these additional detailed causes of failure related to Strategy formulation under the above three sub-headings, as now summarised.

Lack of effective engagement with stakeholders causes

○ *Identifying external stakeholders*
- No owner/user involvement (3)
- Changing sponsor strategy
- Poor sales/marketing links

Under this subheading I mainly focused on the importance of identifying all stakeholders, and offered a checklist to help identification of potential external stakeholders. However, the sources of the three cited causes from Stretton 2015a are highly visible, and their presence indicates that the relevant organisations have a very substantial task in front of them to properly engage with these really key stakeholders.

Unrealistic cost estimates and/ or benefits forecasts causes

- Unrealistic expectations (3)
- Unclear success criteria
- Overzealous advocacy
- Funding difficulties

Here, the first three cited causes of failure would be substantially mitigated if cost and benefits estimates were reasonably realistic and available. Funding difficulties could also be substantially mitigated if potential funding bodies were presented with properly prepared and well supported cost and benefits estimates/forecasts

Other external causes

- Adverse geophysical conditions
- Inflation
- Poor political environment (2)
  - *Political hubris*
  - *Other formulation-related causes*

The first two causes are not related to identifiable stakeholders. The *adverse geophysical conditions* cause is an example of what could be a multitude of potential external causes that are particular to individual strategic initiatives and their component projects. On the other hand the *inflation* cause is an example of external causes that could affect many, if not most, initiatives/ projects.

Poor political environment of course relates to political stakeholders, presumably in countries with substantial political instability. But this heading gave me an opportunity to discuss another politically-related cause of failure much closer to home (Australia), namely *political hubris,* which currently appears to get more attention in the local press than it does in the wider project management literature.

Finally, regarding other strategy formulation-related causes, one can perhaps summarise the situation by pointing out that there may well be more stakeholder-related sources beyond those check-listed in Figure 3, and there are most certainly more non-stakeholder-related causes than the two cited above.

Additionally, the environment in which most strategic initiatives/ projects are undertaken is typically dynamic, so that close and continuing surveillance of external factors that may impact on the success of such initiatives is absolutely necessary.

On the defensive side, failure to identify and engage with such factors, be they stakeholder-related or non-stakeholder-related, may jeopardise such ventures, even to the point of forced abandonment. On the positive side, recognition of, and engagement with, such factors may well lead to enhancing the value of the strategic initiative.

Therefore, on both counts, early recognition of potential sources of failure, and/or of sources which could add value, can only result in improved strategy formulation, and subsequent strategy development, execution, outcomes and benefits.

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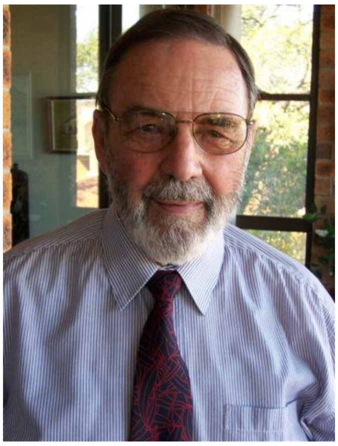
About the Author



Alan Stretton, PhD

Faculty Corps, University of Management and Technology, Arlington, VA (USA)

Life Fellow, AIPM (Australia)

Alan Stretton is one of the pioneers of modern project management. He is currently a member of the Faculty Corps for the University of Management & Technology (UMT), USA. In 2006 he retired from a position as Adjunct Professor of Project Management in the Faculty of Design, Architecture and Building at the University of Technology, Sydney (UTS), Australia, which he joined in 1988 to develop and deliver a Master of Project Management program. Prior to joining UTS, Mr. Stretton worked in the building and construction industries in Australia, New Zealand and the USA for some 38 years, which included the project management of construction, R&D, introduction of information and control systems, internal management education programs and organizational change projects. He has degrees in Civil Engineering (BE, Tasmania) and Mathematics (MA, Oxford), and an honorary PhD in strategy, programme and project management (ESC, Lille, France). Alan was Chairman of the Standards (PMBOK) Committee of the Project Management Institute (PMI®) from late 1989 to early 1992. He held a similar position with the Australian Institute of Project Management (AIPM), and was elected a Life Fellow of AIPM in 1996. He was a member of the Core Working Group in the development of the Australian National Competency Standards for Project Management. He has published over 190 professional articles and papers. Alan can be contacted at alanailene@bigpond.com.au.