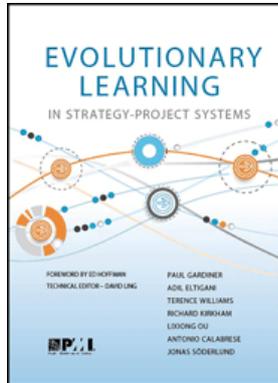


## PM WORLD BOOK REVIEW



Book Title: ***Evolutionary Learning in Strategy-Project Systems***

Authors: **Paul Gardiner, Adil Eltigani, Terence Williams, Richard Kirkham, Lixiong Ou, Antonio Calabrese, Jonas Soderlund**

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Reviewer: **Sean M. Thomas, PMP**      Review Date: Jan 2019

### Introduction

At its core, “Evolutionary Learning in Strategy-Project Systems” is a research study in what makes organizations of all shapes and sizes more effective and more efficient. The focus becomes sharper when the research indicates that the individuals hold the key to success by means of their contributions toward organizational assets (ex: knowledge base establishment and use) and a concerted focus on serious reflections of results, as well as allusions to the three types of reflective practice.

There is a constant undercurrent of supported theory throughout these co-authored works that “moderately and highly mature organizations follow diverse models of learning with a focus on social interactions as a medium for learning.” Re-stated simply, the more successful organizations are found to place stronger emphasis on multiple means of acquiring and utilizing their knowledge/organizational assets, whereas organizations of lesser discipline in this area are found to be quite the opposite, being far less effective and efficient in using their knowledge and abilities (human resources largely) to capture, review, learn from, and use results of the same. This means mistakes are repetitious when unacknowledged.

### Overview of Book’s Structure

This book begins with a Foreword by Dr. Edward J. Hoffman, Former NASA Chief Knowledge Officer, who explains through experience that the difference between practice and theory can be vast, but relevant. While knowledge, in and of itself, is not new, the handling, processing, storage, and retrieval of knowledge is very much new, and relatively unexplored. He explains that Knowledge officers, when brought into an organization, are largely and necessarily of a different background than the organizational mission itself, as well as the resources (human resources for example) it utilizes. This fact places immediacy on the new knowledge officer to be presented with the mission, the processes, the plans and actions, and the needs/requirements

of proper learning and knowledge handling/usage. Finally, he calls for the strong focus on practice and capability development both, which will make findings such as the ones in this book, altogether relevant for organizations seeking greater excellence.

The book's introduction begins by acknowledging the disparity in the Project Management field that there is a definite lack of unity on where project management is and where it's going. But "Evolutionary Learning in Strategy-Project Systems" shines a bright light on how organizations might effectively bring order out of Project Management chaos. It draws on leading theories of top researchers to aid in stemming-the-tide of those chaos-sayers and malcontent-manufacturers. It's important, for the sake of perspective, to understand that there is a honest attempt here to re-think project management in terms of combining it with strategic management. This theory embraces the idea that project management is complex, and therefore new paradigms are inevitable, particularly in systematically fostering learning and capability development.

Next the book delves into briefly explaining and dissecting the lucid works of past researchers such as Deming, Mintzberg and Waters, Leybourne, Almarri and Gardiner, Killen, Juille & Pollack, Laszlo, Giddens, and many more. All aspects of business complexity, from Quality to Risk, Resources to Knowledge Acquisition, acknowledgment versus acceptance, and all other aspects and contributors to Organizational success, all point to the notion that complexity characterizes all human endeavors today (page 17).

The pilot research focused on issues of learning and value in complex projects (p. 45). Different stakeholders in different organizations were used to collect the data used in this study, and results in support of the evolutionary learning theory are found at every level in each researched organization. There are sharp distinctions made to distinguish the correct and incorrect use of technical verbiage, which elucidates the topic for the reader with effectiveness, without belaboring the ideas. These distinctions afford the reader a definite ability to comprehend the ideas and findings with consistent immediacy. The results of the study are 15 identified modes of learning that are "active in shaping and honing the strategy-project system for competitive advantage".

## Highlights

An interesting part of this literature is the summary of the main points of five central issues associated with capability building, which are as follows (p. 38):

1. Project competence is context dependent. The kind of capabilities needed might vary depending on the strategy that a firm pursues.
2. Project competence is oriented both toward the generation of projects as well as the execution of projects. Front-end processes are critical.
3. Project competence spans several different kinds of projects. Long-term success is dependent on business projects, development projects, and change projects.

4. Project competence needs to grasp several underlying capabilities to generate system-wide effects: project generation, project organizing, project leadership, and project teamwork.
5. Project epochs are critical for the establishment of long-term project competence. These major changes are oriented toward changes in all areas of project competence, including project generation, project organizing, project leadership, and project teamwork.

## **The 15 Modes of Learning**

### **The First 13 (Existed Previous to this Research)**

1. Codification of Individual Knowledge
2. Practice to Codification
3. Codification to Practice
4. Face to Face
5. Understanding Context
6. Leadership Led
7. Research
8. Learning from External Sources
9. Employee Feedback
10. Innovative Thinking
11. Quality Management Tools
12. Performance Management
13. Training and Education

### **And Two New Modes of Learning from this Research**

14. *Meta-capability of Learning, or when organizations learn how to learn by being aware of and developing capability in different modes of learning (having more than one way/mode of learning increases ones ability to learn more intelligently)*
15. *Active engagement of an organizations employees in the process of structuration. Structuration is defined, basically, as a reflexive activity in which employees engage based on current capabilities, embedded social surroundings, workplace norms, and internal/external contextual factors. This may further extend to “reflexive practitioners” by three types of reflection: reflection in action, reflection on action, and reflection for action. (page 106)*

Some of the specific findings of this research were especially interesting. For instance, all organizations that may be classified as “low maturity” have the following Modes of Learning in common of the first 13 listed above:

Leadership Led, Codification of Knowledge, Learning from External, Employee Feedback, and Face to Face. “Moderately mature” organizations utilized all 13 Modes of Learning except Codification of Individual Knowledge and Employee Feedback. While “Mature” (Highly Mature) organizations include all 13 except Leadership Led, Codification of Knowledge, Performance Management, and Innovative Thinking. And

all three types of Maturity Levels of Organizations (Low, Moderate, Mature) share a common thread of Learning from External and Face to Face.

Even more interesting, from the perspective of myself as a PMI-ACP (Agile Certified Practitioner), is the implication that organizations/entities that try to depend on learning from Leadership are among the low-maturity entities in general for learning from their mistakes. They also rely more on the skills of separate individuals rather than group learning. This is a more conventional, or waterfall, approach to project management, and demonstrates the strength of Agile Projects since they are led by experts (instead of just one Leader or Project Manager) working collocated and congruently to achieve specific results (user stories). This further supports the statement made by the research authors that “knowledge is best shared through practice” (page 98).

### **Highlights: What I liked!**

I strongly agree with the five conditions required to be in place for an effective learning capability. These are:

1. Leadership Commitment
2. Developing and Facilitating diverse modes of learning
3. Creating opportunities for employees from different parts of the organization to meet and share knowledge, especially from different parts of the world in the case of multinational companies
4. Balancing between rigor and freedom
5. Embedding learning in project management methodologies and processes

At the end of the day, there is clearly an enormous role for leadership in every organization for buy-in at every level. If support from the top of the organizational hierarchical chart either does not exist or does not exist strongly enough, then the chances of meaningful change, as this research indicates and demonstrates, are miniscule at best.

As shown in Chapter 7, Discussion, there must be a “sensing” on some level of the organization of issues that require being addressed (as well as acceptance of this reality) before any “reflection” can take place (reference to Giddens, page 104). This is where the authors of “Evolutionary Learning” add “Reconfiguring”, or finding solutions for change, as the means to affect learning capabilities on a most impactful level to any organization. In fact, using a type of backwards logic, one may ascertain that mature organizations are *mostly* mature if they do learn from their mistakes, and are open to the possibility of improvement in every mode, every way. And this again, refers to the 15 modes of learning (see above).

### **Who might benefit from the Book?**

Any serious professional at a supervisory level or higher, who wishes to institute value and be a positive element of betterment for their organization, would benefit greatly from reading this book. While it is a more technical read, as research is, it gives you

grassroots understanding of the possibilities entailed with capability development at all levels, macro- and micro-, for every organization in the world.

Following the modes of learning in this research could turn around failing organizations and help them incorporate a healthier intelligence at every echelon, weaponizing knowledge and lessons learned to aid them in their efforts at seeking a sustainable competitive advantage and re-molding themselves, individually and organizationally, into a more effective and efficient entity.

## **Conclusion**

The research presented in this book is well written and sufficiently studied. The findings support the necessity for all organizations to focus more intently on developing their capabilities by creating and prioritizing their knowledge in order to support the long-term goals and stated mission of their entity. A capability learning model has been created out of this research to aid organizations in their efforts at becoming as effective as more mature entities in proper and smart valuation of information stemming from lessons learned and tacit knowledge from all stakeholders at all levels, and especially on the front-end of projects and operations.

This book is a *strongly recommended-read* for every knowledge-contributing member of the Project Management Institute, particularly those who contribute directly to the future editions of all Bodies of Knowledge.

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For more about this book, go to:

<https://marketplace.pmi.org/Pages/ProductDetail.aspx?GMProduct=00101612301>

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## About the Reviewer



### **Sean M. Thomas, PMP**

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At present, Sean is the VP of Marketing for the Alamo Chapter of the Project Management Institute, located in San Antonio, Texas. Sean holds an MBA from University of Texas at San Antonio as well as the PMI credentials PMP and PMI-ACP. He is also a Lean Six Sigma Black Belt (LSSBB). Through his company, he teaches PMP and PMI-ACP Exam Prep Courses all over the world for government and non-government organizations alike, his students boasting the world's highest PMP and PMI-ACP exam first-time test-taking pass rate of 99.7% (a near 3-sigma standard), for all students who follow the careful course curriculum designed by Sean himself.

Sean helps companies/organizations get their projects back on track and deliver their results on time and on budget, and provides training for those organizations to empower them to achieve the same on future projects, endeavors, and operations.

Sean is an Adjunct Faculty/Professor for Hallmark University in San Antonio, TX, teaching for the Schools of Business and Information Technology, including Project Management, Macro and Micro Economics, Marketing, Resource Management, Entrepreneurism, Mathematics/Statistics, etc. Sean has ten years experience in the US Army, both in demolitions and Armor (tank commander) having served two combat tours, and becoming badly wounded on his second while leading and protecting his troops. After being medically retired out of the Army in 2008 at the rank of Captain, he continued his education and practiced consulting work for a wide range of organizations, which he continues to do, and in 2012 he started his own company called Project Vanguard LLC.

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