

Advances in Project Management Series¹

Taking responsibility for our actions: The return of stewardship²

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Do our actions matter? Can we, or the actions that we take, make a difference beyond our own sphere and influence? Should we therefore consider the global impact of our intentions?

We are often far too occupied with our own interests, preferences, priorities, issues, concerns and tribulations to observe the wider implications and impacts beyond our immediate context. Yet, it increasingly appears that our private little arrangements and engagements can still make a difference to the wider world beyond our immediate and obvious concerns. This article aims to encourage a more responsible and considerate mindset.

Love unchained

Love padlocks, or lovelocks, are padlocks attached to a bridge, fence, gate, post or monument by couples to symbolise and attest their everlasting love. Couples typically inscribe their names or initials onto the lock before affixing it to a public monument or gateway and throwing away the key into a river or waterway to symbolise the unbreakable bond that has been sealed through such action.

For the individuals involved lovelocks are a harmless phenomenon demonstrating an aspiration for a life-long, unbreakable commitment to their partnership. Indeed, one could argue that lovelocks are significantly less obtrusive than carving, daubing or plastering the names onto a bridge, monument, ancient wall, prehistoric ruin, subterranean cave or a natural beauty spot.

Lovelocks appear to have proliferated in many countries and regions since the early 2000s, particularly adorning bridges in the centre of main cities. In Rome, the attaching of lovelocks to the Ponte Milvio bridge was documented in a popular book, *I Want You* by Federico Moccia published in 2006 and further immortalised when it was adapted into a film in 2007. Nonetheless, many people associate lovelocks with the Pont des Arts bridge in the centre of Paris. Pont des Arts, also known as Passerelle des Arts, is a popular pedestrian bridge which crosses the River Seine, connecting the Institut de France to the central square of the Palais Du Louvre. It was the first iron bridge built in France, which opened in 1804 as a toll footbridge. In 1991, UNESCO listed the entire Parisian riverfront between the Eiffel Tower and the Ile

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Saint Louis, including the Pont des Arts, as a World Heritage Site. Since 2008 lovelocks have been appearing on the Pont des Arts bridge. By 2012, the number of locks covering the bridge had become overwhelming with locks being placed upon other locks. In February 2014, *Le Monde* estimated that there were over 700,000 locks on the bridge. With little free space remaining on the bridge, lovelocks have since spread to at least 11 other Seine bridges, the footbridges on the Canal St Martin, and more recently, to fences and posts in parks and to public monuments all over the city, including the site of the Eiffel Tower.

So, does a personal gesture and intimate bond sealed between two lovers by affixing a lovelock to the side of a bridge impact others?

Well, so it would appear as many little gestures can add up to significant unintended consequences. As a result of the continuous addition of individual locks, the historic bridge at Pont des Arts historic started experiencing new problems. The city of Paris would later remove 1 million locks attached to the Pont des Arts, with a total weight in excess of 45 tonnes. In May 2014 the Paris Mayoress, Anne Hidalgo concerned about the safety of the historic bridge and the wider impact on the city had tasked her First Deputy Mayor with finding alternatives to lovelocks in Paris. A month later, in June 2014, the parapet on the bridge collapsed under the combined weight of the lovelocks (BBC, 2014). Under the added weight, one side of the railing simply crumpled into the water. The railing was replaced and notices were left requesting that people stop the lovelock habit. Still, the love tokens started re-appearing, ultimately forcing the city to replace the railings with protective glass panels in search of an alternative material to which lovelocks could not be attached.

The original bridge had featured in many films and TV shows and had been enjoyed by millions of tourists and locals over the years. It had survived aerial bombardments during the first and second world wars as well as multiple collisions with boats (although it had been replaced after a barge crashed into it in 1977); however, over one million individual acts of demonstrative love overwhelmed the structure and its built-in safety margins and tolerances, causing the side to collapse.

The Paris City Council reports two main concerns for the city resulting from the trend of leaving lovelocks on bridges: degradation of property heritage and a risk to the safety of visitors and locals. Locals also complain about the resulting graffiti, pickpockets and vendors selling cheap padlocks, turning former heritage areas into unpleasant no-go zones. Some would even argue that the entire UNESCO World Heritage designation was endangered by the love lock phenomena. Furthermore, the rust from the locks (and the rust and pollution caused by keys discarded into river beds) has also been cited as problematic.

Throughout Paris, workers have been regularly removing lovelocks from bridges. Chicago has been removing lovelocks from the city's moveable bridges which are raised for boat traffic, out of fear for damaging boats and hurting people on them. Paris and other cities have been experimenting with legislation to ban the practice. In Berlin affixing a lovelock to a bridge is a misdemeanour and can generate fines of 35 Euros. The city of Venice has introduced a 3,000 Euro fine for the same offence. Moscow offers a different and more creative approach by installing metal trees for lovers to hang their locks from, whilst creating a dynamic new form of street art. Meanwhile, while it is now possible to pre-order and customise engraved physical

love padlocks online, entrepreneurs offer lasting virtual lovelock-free alternatives to replace the physical artefacts.

Extending our scope of interest

Individuals appear to be focused on their own actions, needs and motivations, often ignoring the wider consequences which are not framed within their direct and immediate context. This enables consequences of actions to escape closer scrutiny as they reside in a different time frame that persists beyond the action space, and therefore defies attention and consideration.

A noteworthy warning to consider wider impacts is encapsulated through the ancient proverb *For want of a nail*:

For want of a nail

For want of a nail the shoe was lost.
For want of a shoe the horse was lost.
For want of a horse the rider was lost.
For want of a rider the message was lost.
For want of a message the battle was lost.
For want of a battle the kingdom was lost.
And all for the want of a horseshoe nail.

The proverb has been expressed in different forms, through many variations and multiple languages, over hundreds of years, dating back to the beginning of the 13th century. It serves notice that seemingly unimportant actions, small dysfunctions or omissions can become amplified and have grave and unforeseen consequences. Actions can thus initiate chains of causality, or wide impacts over different levels and systems.

Perhaps a key lesson is that we need to become more mindful of our actions and their impacts, however well intentioned. If a relatively inconsequential padlock can multiply and lead to collapsing bridges, boat accidents, the deterioration of neighbourhoods and the destruction of recognised international monuments, perhaps it is also time to consider the longer-term implications of more significant and pre-planned undertakings, such as projects, programmes and change initiatives.

As individuals become more obsessed with their own personality, image, appearance and actions, online and more generally, and as social tools perpetuate and encourage positioning ourselves at the centre of things, both the rhyme and the lovelocks on the bridge can encourage a readjustment; a repositioning of our self-interest in a wider, richer and more responsible context.

Indeed, if only one individual was to deposit a padlock on a single bridge, the overall impact of a relatively harmless action would be negligible. However, if everyone starts to behave in that same manner, impacting overall resources or common assets it is no longer harmless. Ecologists, economists and social scientists refer to this effect as the *tragedy of the commons* (Hardin, 1968), as a shared resource is destroyed as a result of mass action and exploitation by many individuals all acting independently according to their self-interest. The combined effect

of many such collective actions is to erode, deplete, spoil and destroy the common resource. In this context, the commons is taken to mean any shared and unregulated resource ranging from the natural atmosphere, beauty spots, open space, rivers, oceans, lakes, energy, trees, oil, coal and animals, bird and fish stock, to the artificial, man-made artefacts including roads, highways, bridges, parks and monuments.

Common resource systems can collapse due to overuse by the wider community unless an effort is made to regulate or govern such use (Ostrom, 1990; Ostrom et al., 2002). Such regulation could be done by the wider community or group, or emerge from the responsible actions of cognisant individuals.

‘Individualism is cherished because it produces freedom, but the gift is conditional: The more the population exceeds the carrying capacity of the environment, the more freedoms must be given up’ (Hardin, 1998; p. 683).

The case for stewardship

An alternative to imposed governance and top-down regulation can come from informed stewardship where interested and engaged local members co-operate and co-ordinate their actions in order to avoid the collapse of common resources. The notion of stewardship embodies responsibility, added consideration and a focus on sustaining the common interest. The Oxford Dictionary describes stewardship as *‘the act of taking care of or managing something, for example property, an organization, money or valuable objects’*.

The Merriam-Webster Dictionary defines stewardship as *‘the conducting, supervising or managing of something, especially the careful and responsible management of something entrusted to one’s care’*, offering the specific example of stewardship of natural resources. Stewardship thus seems to refer to the way we protect, utilise, share and manage special resources or a specific capability or value. In theological discourse, across multiple religions, it is often referred to as the theological belief that humans are responsible for the world, or the universe, and should therefore cherish and take care of it.

The term was popularised by Peter Block’s book *Stewardship: Choosing service over self-interest* published in 1993 to great acclaim. The book became a best seller selling over 200,000 copies, before being re-issued in a revised anniversary edition in 2013. Block (2013, p. xxiv) defines stewardship as *‘the choice to preside over the orderly distribution of power’*. This entails giving people at the bottom and the boundaries of the organisation choice over how to serve a customer, a citizen, a community, whilst recognising that they are operating in service rather than in control. In a nutshell, stewardship is accountability without control or compliance (ibid.). This is done through deepening the commitment to service and to supporting the wider community. In analysing developments over the twenty years between the two editions, block re-positions stewardship as *‘a choice to (1) act in service of the long run, and (2) act in service to those with little power’* (ibid.; p. 1).

Block views stewardship as an intention to distribute power more widely across the organisation, especially to the lowest levels of the organisation, emphasising the common good for the communities. The starting point is the willingness to be accountable for some larger body than ourselves; a team, an organisation or a community through the notions of service and commitment.

‘Stewardship is the set of principles and practices that have the potential to make dramatic changes in the governance of our institutions. It is concerned with creating a way of governing ourselves that creates a strong sense of ownership and responsibility for outcomes at every level of the organization. It is a buck that stops everywhere. It means having more of a partnership with customers and creating self-reliance on the part of all who are touched by the institution. It says that the answer to economic problems is not reduced costs or better funding; it is to focus on relationships, reciprocity, and participation first. These are the elements that produce the service we seek. This is what will put us closer to our employees and our marketplace. Stewardship is creating a sustainable connection with the people in our playing field that is the answer to our concerns about economics.’ (ibid.; p. 15)

Block argues compellingly for a move away from typical patriarchy and hierarchy as the core forms of governance. The purpose of the shift is to liberate initiative and spirit within organisations and their employees by fostering empowerment, ownership and responsibility. The position distinguishes the capacity to decide and the responsibility for our thoughts and actions. The change in attitude and approach requires a number of fundamental adjustments and intentional choices, which Block poses as:

- Replacing leadership with stewardship
- Choosing partnership over patriarchy
- Choosing adventure over safety
- Choosing service over self interest

Block’s emphasis on ownership and responsibility is essential to securing the success of organisations and must be implemented at every level of the organisation. The reform is particularly important to enable management and stewardship systems to deal with the following organisational challenges (p. 28-30):

1. **Doing more with less:** There is a need to own accountability and responsibility for product, service and the customer, especially with fewer people and growing demands
2. **Learning to adapt to customers and the marketplace:** As customers become more important, there is a need to enable and empower those at the front line who deal with customers to respond and address customer needs without resorting to authority
3. **Creating passion and commitment in employees:** Creating commitment relies on developing a sense of ownership and responsibility, especially when job security is no longer guaranteed

Davis et al. (1997) position stewardship as an alternative to agency theory, thereby eschewing an economic basis for governance considerations, focusing instead on sociological and psychological approaches and considerations. Individuals can thus be viewed as collectivists, pro-organisational and trustworthy (p. 20). Hernandez (2012; p. 174) defines stewardship as *‘the extent to which an individual willingly subjugates his or her personal interests to act in protection of others’ long-term welfare’*.

Stewardship does not require a formal position, power or authority; stewardship behaviours can be enacted across all levels of an organisation. The underlying assumption is that managers and workers will act as responsible stewards of assets and resources at their disposal, preferring pro-organisational behaviour to self-serving individualism. Stewards typically pursue a more responsible, long term and trustworthy agenda. The concept of stewardship has been applied to many different aspects including nature, the environment, resources, economics, health, and data.

Product stewardship

Moving from self-interest towards service as advocated by Block is a revolutionary idea which overcomes the artificial separation between doing and managing, as conceived and encouraged through the lens and practice of scientific management (Dalcher, 2017). Stewardship encourages individuals to operate beyond their self-interest. It restores power to front line workers, enables the creation of positive organisations and builds on their power to change and transform (Dalcher, 2019). Moreover, it places a greater emphasis on the extended products, outputs and outcomes of change initiatives and on the longer-term considerations regarding intervention and lasting improvement for the concerned community.

Until recently this area has escaped significant consideration within project work; however, the seventh edition of the APM Body of Knowledge points out that many projects need to include consideration of the management of change and the realisation of benefits, thereby requiring the use of extended life cycles (Murray-Webster & Dalcher, 2019; p. 24). The consideration of benefits extends beyond the handover of defined project outputs, encompassing additional adoption and realisation activities and considerable subsequent contact with change subjects. More crucially, however, there is a need to account for the full product life span from initial idea, through development, evolution and upgrades, to removal from service and ultimate dismantling (Ibid.; 26). Whilst such considerations extend beyond the traditional project boundaries, issues regarding operation, upgrade, decommissioning and disposal can be supported through the application of a stewardship stance to the wider project context.

“The product life cycle helps in making sustainable choices and embraces the principles of product stewardship, advocating that everyone who benefits commercially from a product has a shared responsibility to minimise its environmental impacts. Adopting a whole life cycle or a full product life cycle perspective enables executives and managers to responsibly engage with the long-term future implications of their project-related actions, and discharge their increasingly emerging responsibility for proper end of life disposal of systems and assets in a responsible, affordable and effective manner.” (Ibid.)

Nonetheless, very little has been written about the application of the product life cycle and the underpinning need for stewardship in the context of project work. New thinking on environmental impacts of products and projects is essential to developing enhanced understanding of pragmatic practice in this area. Moreover, as product stewardship has become more mainstream there is a fundamental need to access this content and make it available to the project community. This month’s contribution by Dr Helen Lewis addresses this important gap by offering much needed thought leadership and practical guidance. The contribution is derived from her book *Product stewardship in action: The business case for life-cycle thinking* published by Greenleaf publishing/Routledge.

Dr Lewis' work offers an important introduction to product stewardship and describes how and why leading companies are taking responsibility for the environmental impact of their products and packaging. The work draws on knowledge and experience of industry practitioners and other experts to provide a structured approach to product responsibility within organisations.

Lewis views stewardship as an amalgamation of voluntary action by organisations with regulated schemes which encompass social and environmental impacts. In doing so she extends product stewardship beyond the realm of regulated schemes and compliance to include ethical and social responsibility for actions. Product stewardship is therefore duly defined as the '*principle that everyone involved in the manufacture, distribution or consumption of a product shares responsibility for the environmental and social impacts of that product over its life cycle*' (Lewis, 2017; p. 5).

Lewis' definition is significant as it extends beyond the manufacturing (or project delivery or deployment team) to include various agencies such as distributors, suppliers, retailers and brand owners. Most notably, it also encompasses the consumption side of products drawing consumers and users into the pool of responsible stewards. Project teams may form an inevitable part of the manufacturing concerns, but they must also be aware that the responsibility extends throughout the fully extended life cycle. The inclusion of distributors and consumers could thus place an additional responsibility on the production and project teams to consider the ensuing interaction and impacts and to design products and projects with such considerations in mind. A further implication is that product responsibility clearly extends beyond the formal handover and commissioning. Indeed, nor is it limited to decommissioning and disposal, but to the full range of potential actions during use and utilisation.

Lewis introduces an extremely useful framework for considering the scope of Product stewardship across four key areas of activity (p. 10-11):

- Policies that establish goals and targets for product sustainability
- Design processes that consider sustainability impacts across whole life cycles
- Procurement policies and guidelines
- Recovery of products at end of life; fully or partially funded by producers

Product stewardship can be contrasted with Extended Producer responsibility (EPR). EPR places the responsibility for the product, throughout the entire life cycle with the manufacturer, especially in terms of recycling and disposal. EPR can therefore be viewed as a strategy to add all of the environmental costs associated with the product throughout its life cycle to the market price for the product (OECD, 2001). Lewis points out that EPR is widely accepted as the basis for product-related environmental policies, particularly in the European Union (EU), Japan, South Korea, Taiwan and many Canadian provinces (p. 5). Although EPR and product stewardship overlap to some extent, Lewis concludes that EPR focuses on mandatory aspects, whilst product stewardship also encompasses the voluntary aspects (Lewis, 2017; p. 9); it thus comes closer to Block's take on stewardship (1993/2013). If EPR forms the basis for establishing product responsibility, the framework introduced by Lewis provides a sound basis for establishing product stewardship as a responsible extension beyond compliance and regulation.

Lewis' work makes a powerful case for product stewardship as a business strategy rather than a philanthropic exercise. It highlights the benefit from achieving public and commercial shared value by responding effectively to stakeholder concerns regarding the environment. Lewis positions stewardship as an ethical and social obligation, yet one that can also be viewed as a source of competitive advantage for the business. Ultimately it is an imperative if we want to guarantee a sustainable future for our community and its cherished resources.

Stewardship reprised

Product stewardship places the spotlight on the product and its overall impact. Its value is in getting manufacturers and managers to rethink and reconsider the wider impacts—and possibly redesign or reposition the resulting product accordingly. Rosselot & Allen (2001) note that engineers and managers must address changing needs and consider how their products will be recycled, how their customers will use their products and what environmental hazards might arise.

'Simply stated, engineers must become stewards for their products and processes throughout their life cycles' (ibid.).

Making use of the whole life cycle encourages a process perspective encompassing the full production-utilisation-disposal chain, thereby leading to better informed and more responsible decision making regarding the product, and its intended use. Product stewardship extends the responsibility to everyone involved in the product chain through the extended life cycle of the product: Whoever designs, produces, sells, or uses a product is called to take responsibility for minimising the product's impacts throughout all stages of the life cycle. Ultimately, managing a product through an extended life cycle allows consideration of the long-term implications, decreases environmental impacts and shares the burden and ownership of responsibility with all actors and participants.

Lane & Watson maintain that product stewardship has radical potential as a means to promote significant change in the relationship between society and the material world (2012; p. 1254). The Product Stewardship Society frames product stewardship as an emerging and evolving profession. Product stewardship is defined as *'responsibly managing the health, safety, and environmental aspects of raw materials, intermediate, and consumer products throughout their life cycle and across the value chain in order to prevent or minimize negative impacts and maximize value'* (PSS, 2014; p. 4). Whilst different industries and sectors may have divergent definitions and approaches, Lewis' work provides an important and timely guide to the application of product stewardship in practice.

The notion of stewardship is an important addition to the discourse around responsibility, particularly in terms of the commitment to future generations. While producer responsibility accounts for some of the impacts, shared responsibilities, in the form of stewardship, extend to include all other users and participants, developing a wider set of accountable and responsible actors. Adopting the lens of stewardship enables, facilitates and encourages important development in considering the wider implications of actions that extend beyond self-interest and selfish acts by individuals.

Stewardship is tasked with protecting and cherishing the public interest. This can be done by adopting the commons imperative and considering the greater good, which adds a social dimension to the environmental considerations. Stewardship extends beyond prohibition and regulation to develop a more systemic and comprehensive mindset that allows ownership and empowerment of all participants. Stewardship is thus entrusted to individuals, who are in a position to consider the wider implications of their actions, and safeguard common global resources.

Developing stewards requires new ways of building organisations, making decisions, prioritising and managing. By encouraging individuals to consider the implications of potential actions, the collective can become more responsible and better accountable for shared resources ranging from bridges and beauty spots to water, livestock and the environment. It can also offer social and societal empowerment which is needed to underpin wider considerations. Collaborating for the greater good is essential if we want to protect our entrusted commons. Michael Barber observes that stewardship is about leaving a system better than you found it. Our key to the prosperity of future communities may well be in fostering stewardship skills and capabilities in all aspiring members as we begin to collaborate towards creating and facilitating a better common future.

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