

Advances in Project Management Series¹

Reboot for purpose: Beyond the tragedy of the commons²

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It is not often that we get the opportunity to reboot life, and start all over again. Imagine that you have been given a chance to redesign your life, restructure your routines, re-configure your organisation and re-purpose and re-position it strategically. Where would you start? What would you change?

Most of us are change averse, especially when the change originates elsewhere, and would rapidly seek to resume old habits and resort to the safety of the recognisable and the known. Indeed, ‘normal’ management relies heavily on well established, repeatable routines and habits. Small perturbations typically offer the impetus to restore the stable status-quo and resume where we left off, thus minimising variations.

Crises present an opportunity to reboot society and realign ourselves to match a rapidly changing landscape (Dalcher, 2020). Significant crises, such as the Covid-19 pandemic, invite, or even demand, fundamental and far reaching transformations to the way individuals, communities, organisations, societies, and even states, organise themselves. More critically, as we frantically search for new responses and approaches to match the novel dimensions we encounter, such conditions necessitate radical reflection on the purpose of our systems, organisations and structures, and the philosophies, values and positions that underpin them.

The tragedy of the commons

Crises demand that we endeavour to question, reflect upon and make sense of our aspirations, assumptions and intentions. They often bring out the worst and the best in people. When crises strike, we may see an urgent scramble for resources emphasising selfish personal interests (Mills, 1836; Dalcher, 2014), but as communities and societies attempt to recover, and resume into a new normality, there is also an emerging need for greater scrutiny of potential modes of co-existing and collaboration (Tsolkas, 2020). Such repositioning inevitably questions the values that underpin and support co-existence (Walsh, 2007; Folke et al., 2010).

¹*The PMWJ Advances in Project Management series includes articles by authors of program and project management books published by Routledge publishers worldwide. Each month an introduction to the current article is provided by series editor Prof Darren Dalcher, who is also the editor of the Routledge Advances in Project Management series of books on new and emerging concepts in PM. To see [project management books published by Routledge, click here](#). Prof Dalcher's article is an introduction to the invited paper this month in the PMWJ. See Darren's background and qualifications at the end of this article.*

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The continuous tension between the wishes of the individual, and the needs of the wider community, made up as it is of a collective of individuals with their own personal priorities, have long been recognised. Hardin (1968) invokes the idea of the *tragedy of the commons*, by building on the earlier work of William Forster Lloyd (1833).

Commons, or common land, refer to vast tracts of land that are owned collectively recognising that certain resources could not, and should not, be privately owned and controlled. At one-point commons occupied approximately half of Britain, whereas now they cover about 1.2 million hectares, accounting for roughly 5% of the country (CLF, 2020), often in spectacular landscapes and areas of outstanding natural beauty. People with a right to use a common are known as commoners, and are typically able to graze domestic livestock without fences or boundaries, and to take other specific products from the common, such as wood, vegetation, turves or minerals (Kruse, 2019).

'The common lands scattered all about England and Wales are part of our heritage from the past. They enable considerable areas of land to be preserved and unspoilt. Wherever they are registered as common land they should be preserved intact. ...' Lord Denning in Corpus Christi College vs. Gloucester City Council (Times, 1982).

Common areas allow all commoners to bring their livestock to graze on the commons. *The tragedy of the commons* refers to the situation where individual commoners, acting independently in their own best self-interest, combine to abuse the common resource they hold in trust. As each commoner increases the size of their herds, less and less grazing areas remain available to others, whose herds are also growing, leading to overgrazing and the destruction of the common resource. While the action of each individual taken in isolation may seem rational and in their own personal interest, the pressure resulting from the combination of individual acts overwhelms the shared asset, ultimately, endangering the sustainability of the entire community.

'However, if everyone starts to behave in that same manner, impacting overall resources or common assets it is no longer harmless. The combined effect of many such collective actions is to erode, deplete, spoil and destroy the common resource. ... 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.' (Dalcher, 2019: p. 3-4)

The *tragedy of the commons* shows what happens when each participant maximises their own self-interest, ignoring the overall impacts on the whole system. The actions further inflate the stakes, resulting in destructive dynamics which ultimately lead towards an inevitable disastrous outcome.

'But this is a conclusion reached by each and every rational herdsman sharing a commons. Therein is the tragedy. Each man is locked into a system that compels him to increase his herd without limit—in a world that is limited... Freedom in a commons brings ruin to all.' (Hardin, 1968: p. 1245).

Common pool resources yield finite flows of benefits, encouraging rational utility maximising individuals to overdraw rather than conserve benefits for the common good (Ostrom, 2008). Traditional economic modes of thinking and technologies devised around them appear to be inadequate for resolving *tragedy of the commons* dilemmas, without resorting to a more fundamental re-evaluation of moral, behavioural and ethical systems. *Hardin reflects that '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).

Various authors contend that under certain circumstances, users may be able to restrict access to a resource or establish rules for its sustainable use (see for example, Berkes, 1985; Feeny et al., 1990; Feeny et al., 1996). Elinor Ostrom (1990; 2008) maintains that neither state control nor privatisation of resources offer a sustainable and satisfactory solution, advocating instead for voluntary organisations that can take control of common pool problems. Ostrom's thesis, for which she won the Nobel Prize in Economic Sciences in 2009, maintains that users can find fruitful ways to communicate and organise themselves to limit resource use and conserve resources. In particular, Ostrom (2008: p. 2) contends that common pool users, will:

- expend considerable time and energy devising workable institutions for governing and managing common-pool resources;
- follow costly rules so long as they believe that others also follow these rules;
- monitor each other's conformity with these rules; and
- impose sanctions on each other at a cost to themselves.

An initial requirement is that relevant beneficiaries and stakeholder communities can be clearly established. Beneficiaries can be expected have a stake in maintaining the common resource, so that a set of permissible activities and forbidden actions can be agreed upon by all commoners. While beneficiaries have the motivation to become engaged, Ostrom asserts that the likelihood the users themselves will develop effective institutions is enhanced by the following factors (ibid., slightly paraphrased):

- low discount rates (i.e. most resource users have tenure and long-term common interest in using the resource over an extended period of time);
- homogeneous interests (i.e. most resource users share similar capabilities, technologies, skills, and cultural views of the resource);
- the cost of communication among individuals is low; and
- the cost of reaching binding and enforceable agreements is relatively low.

As long as individuals have the autonomy to make their own agreements, within small to moderate sized groups, many resource user groups will organise themselves to avoid an impending commons tragedy (p. 3). Larger groups would be challenged to adhere to similar rules and specific boundaries, and may need to rely on clusters of smaller groups to provide additional reassurance and belief in any agreed solution. In other words, as long as common principles can be agreed and trust is shared across the community, many users will follow the rules, but only as long as they believe that others are doing the same.

The implications for governance, in normal times as well as following crises are quite critical. External governance and intervention over shared resources cannot be imposed on unwilling participants. In order to reach a workable resolution, trust is an essential ingredient, as are the belief in a common purpose, and the reliance on other actors to continue to honour the co-operation agreement. However, any attempt to alter agreements, make adjustments to the existing arrangements, or devise new rules, even in the wake of an unexpected disaster, may seriously jeopardise existing understanding and imperil the *status quo*.

'Another lesson learned is that any effort to develop new rules for governing and managing complex resources is likely to generate unexpected results and be subject to initial errors. Thus, all technological and institutional interventions need to be approached as an adaptive process that helps generate information about errors so that those involved and others can learn from errors rather than continue to make them. No panaceas exist. Wholesale solutions imposed on many different resources in a large terrain are more likely to be ineffective than efforts that enhance the institutional environment that encourages responsible self-governance, self-monitoring, and self-enforcement.' (Ostrom, 2008: p. 3)

Parents and teachers will be quick to recognise the need to teach children to share limited resources available in a nursery, in an effort to limit tantrums and reduce fighting, but there is an all-important lesson about collaboration and sharing, especially when we are faced with limited or dwindling resources. Pandemics, wars and crisis provide the urgency to revisit values, preferences and governance systems in the interests of sustaining well-being, maintaining peace of mind, or securing survival. It is worth noting that the key impetus for accepting change, is the recognition of the inevitable urgency, which crises are capable of delivering with unquestionable clarity and unmistakable poignancy.

Defining purpose

Finding a shared purpose may hold the key to amicably resolving common resource dilemmas. If most agents are able to identify a purpose that is held in common, it can form the basis for negotiation and agreement that endeavour to support the overall long-term flourishing of the community, as opposed to satisfying the immediate selfish preferences of individuals.

Yet, identifying a common purpose is not that simple. Purpose is a commonly used term that carries many different meanings and interpretation. It is also patently missing from the project management bodies of knowledge, approaches, methodologies and standards. In fairness, nor does purpose feature in general management literature.

The Oxford Dictionary defines purpose as '*the reason for which something is done or created or for which something exists*', The Cambridge English Dictionary refers to '*an intention or aim; a reason for doing something or for allowing something to happen*'. The Collins English Dictionary also focuses on existential reasoning, suggesting that '*the purpose of something is the reason for which it is made or done*'. The Merriam Webster English Dictionary offers a broader classification indicating that it is '*the aim or goal of a person: what a person is trying to do, become, etc.*'.

While the canons of management have little to say about purpose, the disciplines of leadership and change both make ample references to the role and centrality of purpose. Mourkogiannis (2006) opines that purpose is bigger than ambition, aim or strategy, entailing an all-encompassing scope and ubiquity. Emery (2019) acknowledges that purpose is a big buzzword for business, but one that invokes at least six distinct ideas (which are summarised and paraphrased below):

1. Corporate purpose emerges from the corporate responsibility school and relates to an organisation's *raison d'être*. It emphasises responsibility, placing it at the heart of everything that the organisation does, thereby positioning purpose as a societal concept that extends beyond short-term income generation.
2. Shared societal value places purpose within enlightened capitalism, with a longer-term definition of value-generation, and a greater concern for developing sustainable business practice that accommodates workers and participants, in keeping with Quaker-founded businesses of the past. This encourages a long-term perspective that supports people resulting in more engaged, innovative and productive employees.
3. Start with *why* followers represent organisations that begin by defining *why* they exist, then think about *how* they do business, before progressing to consider *what* they do. According to Sinek (2009), following this approach leads to more successful and resilient organisations.
4. Adherents of organisational development of organisational models recognise a move away from hierarchical models fixated with power, towards reconsideration of culture and the roles of multiple stakeholder groups. The next stage in development in this strand would likely feature a greater focus on integrity, wholeness and inner rightness offering a distinct advantage for solving problems in an increasingly more complex and turbulent world.
5. Drawing on neuroscience and individualism, purpose is individually conceived rather than corporately, making purpose a trigger for engagement for people at work. This strand focuses on individuals and their place in the world, therefore highlighting the purpose that people might feel by virtue of the impact they have, the difference they can make and the relationships and interactions they participate in.
6. Individual wellbeing emphasises outcomes, in recognition that a sense of purpose for individuals can bring a sense of coherence and significance, and thereby improve individual health and well-being, and ultimately increase life expectancy. In a work context it also increases the intrinsic motivation, enthusiasm and resilience of individuals. This is predicated on an individual's own purpose, not an ascribed or borrowed vision that can be shared or adopted.

While the six positions offer some variations, they share an interest in individuals, well-being, aspiration, belonging, appreciation, and a longer-term perspective that extends beyond pure monetary and economic concerns. Emery therefore positions purpose as '*something that is commonly understood but individually owned, and which has a bearing on our impact and*

relationships, individually and corporately.' (Emery, 2019: p. 26). Indeed, as noted elsewhere, '*... when an authentic purpose permeates business strategy and decision making, the personal good and the collective good become one.'* (Quinn & Thakor, 2018: p. 81)

O'Brien & Cave (2017) recognise multiple facets that can come together, and suggest looking for purpose at work as the intersection between personal purpose, the organisation's purpose, and the purpose associated with the role that an individual fulfils within their organisation. A good match occurs when the opportunities afforded by the role, line up with the aspirations and values of the organisation, enabling individuals to find their sweet spot and excel.

Mourkogiannis (2006: p. 16) positions purpose as preparation for doing what is right and what is worthwhile. Instead of being an obligation, it provides a way of knowing what can and cannot be done, offering confidence and commitment, and the potential for interpretation and engagement by individuals pursuing what is right and worthwhile. Such pursuit (p. 17) revolves around the four conceptions of discovery (the new), excellence (the intrinsically beautiful), altruism (the helpful) and heroism (the effective). Mourkogiannis concludes that purpose plays a key part in driving the business forward, emphasising six key points, (pp. 16-17, paraphrased below), as:

- It is based on well-established and extensively developed moral ideas
- It advances both competitiveness and morality (purpose resides in the overlap between the two)
- It relates people to plan, and leaders to their colleagues and followers
- It cannot be chosen quickly or in ad hoc fashion; it has to be discovered and may require trial-and-error formulation
- It is a matter of a firm's life or death; its' presence can transform a firm and its absence can destroy an institution
- It is paradoxical; it will boost profits; but only do so if it is pursued for its own sake.
'It will boost morale, build the brand, help in assessing the strategy—but it can never be just a tool. It is this duality that makes a purpose difficult to harness—and hence so valuable' (ibid. p. 17)

Many of the ideas chime with the notions and the concepts long recognised in change management, organisational development, and systems thinking and with techniques focused on the search for a shared vision, overarching design, systems context or the constant need for experimentation needed to probe the external environment. Purpose is thus concerned with discovering, finding and making meaning, and with the identification of how future work can be made more right, meaningful and worthwhile for all participants.

Similar notions also feature in leadership discourse. Kempster et al. (2011: 321) position purpose as an aim which guides action in a broader societal realm—achieving a goal in a particular context. The pursuit of moral purpose underpins the central cornerstone of 'leadership as purpose', enabling happiness to be associated with fidelity to a worthy purpose, and the need to actively seek and engage with the attainment of virtue. Kouzes & Posner (2006: 17) maintain that the purpose of leaders is to mobilise their followers to serve their own purpose, emphasising the necessity to both support and develop followers. Moreover, the

identification and presence of purpose can have desirable motivational effects on followers (Kempster et al.: 325), encouraging further and greater achievements.

'So purpose is not just a lofty ideal; it has practical implications for your company's financial health and competitiveness. People who find meaning in their work don't hoard their energy and dedication. They give them freely, defying conventional economic assumptions about self-interest. They grow rather than stagnate. They do more—and they do it better.'

By tapping into that power, you can transform an entire organization.' Quinn & Thakor, 2018: p. 85).

In search of good dividends: leadership of purpose

Purpose clearly extends beyond financial and economic dimensions. Given the need to seek, discover and make sense of purpose, and the requirement for leaders to steward, support and enable followers to engage on their own journeys, it becomes important to understand where leaders could go in pursuit of new perspective.

If the emphasis offered by traditional economics is both limiting and limited, what other values should we be focusing on, and where can we find a framework that can support such a journey? Moreover, given that we recognise that the role of business, and the projects that underpin it, is to create value, what kinds and types of value should we cherish now? The guest article by Steve Kempster, Ken Parry and Thomas Maak offers important insights and a critical perspective for positioning dividends and value in a business context. The article is extracted from their recent book *Good Dividends: Responsible Leadership of Business Purpose*, published by Routledge.

The work by Kempster, Parry and Maak offers the kind of mindset and framework needed to initiate some of the critical conversations about organisations, their purpose and the potential for delivering and realising value in new ways. Rather than focus solely on finance, the work offers a new business model that seeks to utilise all six capitals of the organisation in order to realise the six good dividends – financial, human, social, brand, operational and one-planet – and subsequently generate good growth and sustainably replenish the capitals.

Financial optimisation and a fixation with financial gain offer short term value as opposed to sustainable performance. Kempster, Parry and Maak attempt to focus on the broader responsibilities of organisations including human, social, reputational and environmental impacts. Defining a broader purpose or intent makes it possible to develop a new theory of purposeful and meaningful business and thereby link the business, its products and services and its employees and stakeholders to realising a higher and more sustainable and enduring value purpose.

If the tragedy of the commons occurs when individuals focus on limited, immediate short-term gratification, the framework offered through this work provides a basis for addressing and engaging in more sophisticated discourse around longer term aims, purpose and intent. With a wider focus on an increasing range of stakes and stakeholders, the framework delivers new ways of engaging with communities and participants. Thinking through more inclusive

frameworks can offer new ways of developing governance and oversights of shared resources and identifying enlightened ways of replenishing, sustaining resources and thriving as communities or firms. Indeed, focusing on the good dividends highlights new complexities, relationships and opportunities for prosperity and development within a system.

Responsible leadership as described by the authors shifts the focus away from the relationship between leader and followers to consider wider connections between leaders and stakeholders. Widening the net de-emphasises the personal scrutiny of leaders, their skills, quality, and capability, allowing the repositioning of attention towards the more important areas of purpose, responsibility, activity and impacts of leadership. Leadership discourse has grown beyond shareholder satisfaction and primary dividends, but the lens of responsible and purposeful leadership embraces the focus on realising value for an expanding range of constituencies, thereby addressing and accommodating multiple concerns and needs.

Responsible leadership and responsible businesses are needed more than ever as we find ourselves toiling under turbulent and difficult conditions. Kempster, Parry and Maak make an important contribution to strengthening business, ethics and sustainability. Their work on good dividends is concerned with realising value from all the capitals of a business. Increasing all the assets of the business, including intangible resources and capabilities, enhances the planet, communities, alongside the business itself, opening potential for more significant and fundamental growth, in a climate of greater responsibility.

Many businesses rely on intangible factors, such as their people, capabilities, links, reputation and brand. The intangibles are often critical to realising value, and engendering growth and sustainable improvement. By offering a wider perspective, emphasising purpose, and recognising the connections between good dividends and the various capitals, it becomes possible to find novel ways to engage with some of the challenges faced by organisations in modern contexts. It also offers new perspectives for addressing turbulence, dealing with common resources and recovering from challenges and crises with new strengths and a fresh appreciation of our purpose and invigorated intentions to build stronger, more robust and resilient organisations that are able to innovate, adapt and thrive in new ways. In a post-crisis world as we seek alternatives to capitalism and learn to cherish the potential for increasing engagement with communities, the work of Kempster, Parry and Maak could offer a much-needed impetus and a new way to frame, position and progress our thinking.

The crisis imperative – a common resource reprise

We live in strange times. Post-crisis recovery is less to do with finding new ways of returning to what we used to know, and more to do with understanding and creating the new normal, and learning to operate in this new reality. Many organisations are still learning to switch and flip between the modes of operations, projects, recovery, restoration and responding to new opportunities and challenges.

‘Most crises create longer-term opportunities as well as threats because they produce rapid, sustained shifts in organizations’ external and internal environments.’ (Watkins & Yaziji, 2020)

How do we begin to respond to new opportunities? Part of our response demands firefighting and addressing the immediate threats unravelled by crises. But many of the issues that unravel relate to old models and antiquated ways of thinking within our disciplinary boundaries.

It might be instructive at this juncture to recall the work of Martin Loosemore published in the International Journal for Project Management. Loosemore (1998) attempted to study the impact of crises on construction projects, noting that each crisis demanded an injection of additional resources often determined by pre-arranged contractual arrangements. However, resorting to the explicit contracts in order to resolve emerging issues resulted in three problematical effects (p. 141):

- ‘*There was little collective responsibility shown in crisis management, those who were not responsible, becoming selfish in their attitude towards a crisis which they considered to be another party's risk.*
- *Distinct winners and losers emerged, resulting in resource redistributions between project members. Problems arose as people sought to ensure that the resource redistributions went in their favour.*
- *Contractual documents became more important as a formal guide to responsibility patterns and as people turned to them, differences in interpretation and understanding often emerged. If not for the crisis, such misunderstandings would have remained hidden and irrelevant. However, their effect was to create uncertainty and detract attention from crisis management.*’ (p. 141)

Resource distribution and governance arrangements seem to intensify following a crisis. The responses identified by Loosemore appear to reflect many of the behaviour patterns observed through the *tragedy of the commons* as participants scramble to protect their own individual interests and pre-established governance arrangements are scrutinised and re-visited to support existing positions. Ironically, many of the same patterns can also be observed in the wake of the latest pandemic. Perhaps not much has changed and people (stakeholders) still rush in to protect their share of a situation or a resource.

Instructively, Loosemore further identifies three fundamental ironies that emerge following a crisis (1998: 139):

- at a time when effective communication is important it is less likely;
- at a time when mutual sensitivity between project members is important it is less likely;
- at a time when collective responsibility and teamwork are important they are less likely

If we adopt a resource view, and endeavour to protect our own stake, it should not be particularly surprising that individuals resort to irrational behaviour patterns that threaten the commons. Unexpected conditions challenge agreements and re-open the need for adopting protective patterns or embracing a defensive-aggressive stance.

The tragedy of the commons teaches us that mutually agreed arrangements can work, as long as simple rules can be put in place. The uncertainties surrounding crises, challenge many of the assumptions made under normal conditions and strain existing relationships. With the aid of limited communication, declining sensitivity and reduced collective responsibility previous arrangements can easily become nullified as actors rush to maximise their individual stakes.

Crises provoke new opportunities and can thus enable society to savour a newly found sense of collectivism. Perhaps a new way forward in managing collective resources and behaviours is to devise a richer perspective that emphasises leadership for a purpose and acknowledges a wealth of different capitals and dividends that can support shared long terms goals and develop new ways of governing. If crises provide a good jumping off point, where opportunities can be taken on board, it might be high time to rethink our priorities, rethink society and our wider needs and redesign a more caring and supportive way of engaging with an aligned and balanced portfolio consisting of more diverse and wider benefits from a range of dividends. Adopting an informed longer-term perspective may finally allow us to coexist in the commons, put our full set of resources into better use, and support, and even re-invigorate our wider communities through episodes of crises, upheaval and sustained purposeful exploration.

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