

On the Subject of Black Elephants¹

LETTER TO THE EDITOR

8 June 2020

Ref: Pells Editorial: [Black Elephants and... maybe Project Management](#), *PM World Journal*, Vol IX, Issue VI, June 2020

Dear David,

Let me begin by applauding your return to writing. Your Black Elephant editorial was timely and most assuredly thought provoking on many levels. I will try to narrow the focus of my comments to two questions you pose at the end of your editorial. “Why are we just responding to crisis after crisis?” and “And why isn’t anyone in the project management world doing anything to stop or at least slow them down?”

Project management differs from operational management (day-to-day running of a business) in a couple fundamental ways that I believe are important to highlight. Projects by their very nature are often non-repetitive and for the game changing giga-projects that are required to deal with Black Elephants this is most certainly the case. By contrast, the very nature of operations involves a degree of repetition.

Project teams and to a high degree their supply chains are temporary endeavors, although some may last decades in the case of true giga-programs. We see higher permanence in operations with an emphasis on employee training, retention and advancement. Project based training all too often is task based and temporal.

Projects have ongoing, multi-faceted exposure to externalities (weather; labor; supply chain) to a degree an operation often bounded by four walls and a roof doesn’t. Decisions made in a project setting are to a large degree irreversible with operations more readily able to “correct” a decision.

Finally, knowledge accumulated in a project context and importantly lessons learned are not readily translated to other projects compared to corporate knowledge management and continuous process improvements one will see in a well-run operation. Project companies do try to capture the knowledge from their projects but seldom share it beyond their corporate boundaries.

Addressing these important differences between the world of projects and the world of operations requires an integrating, accumulating and systems function to provide a

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bridge between projects but more importantly to recognize and encourage the emergence of alternative project management models. I want to underscore this last point since too many alternative project management models still rely heavily on the thinking of Taylor, Gantt and Fayol. In the world of physics all went to Newton until his theory broke down at scale. Traditional project management theory has shown itself to break down at scale and the giga-programs to address Black Elephants will most certainly be trampled. Something more akin to Einstein's theory of relativity will be required.

Our project management organizations do much that is good and have contributed a much-needed element of professionalism. But they remain focused on the Newtonian view of projects, correctly articulated by Gantt and Fayol but falling short of the "relativistic" view that Black Elephants will require.

Our professional societies strive to capture and share knowledge, but in a world where data, information, knowledge and even insight are growing at exponential rates their efforts increasingly fall short. Case histories, lessons learned and best practices are all viewed through a project management lense that has shown itself to repeatedly fail at scale. The response has been to strengthen best practices, often a prime objective of the respective professional societies, and offer a plethora of reasons for project failure that act to let the profession off the hook to a very large degree. Changing politics, technology, societal drivers and even strategic deception are all too convenient to continue to accept a project management theory that will not serve to deliver the projects that hunting Black Elephants will require.

Our professional societies will have to challenge the almost religious beliefs of Fayol and Gantt, at least at scale, if we are to take on the Black Elephants. They will have to act in concert to create a 21st century knowledge commons, capitalizing the new currency of effective project management – data. Risk management must not only recognize the existence of Black Elephants and Black Swans but also the reality that large complex systems, the very ones required to address Black Elephants, behave catastrophically. Fat tails are the norm not the exception. Risks on giga-programs are not deterministic and arguably not even probabilistic. They are emergent.

The management of the giga-programs to address the Black Elephants are themselves emergent and as such project management will require real time situational awareness of changing patterns in the influencing flows that shape and affect giga-programs. Flexibility, adaptability and responsiveness will be measures of the resilience and effectiveness of the project management organizations needed to take on Black Elephants.

Can our professional societies meet this challenge? They must since no other organizing structure readily exists to provide the integrating, accumulating and systems functions necessary to bridge between projects.

The Black Elephants are there. You see them, I see them and I believe the professional societies do as well. But until we recognize that our current paradigms, theories and

frameworks will not allow us to address their power and trajectory, we are relegated to watching their steady and impressive approach, at least until we are trampled.

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