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LETTER TO THE EDITOR

On the Subject of Alan Stretton's first series article on "Project Successes and Failures" in the December 2014 PM World Journal

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Dear Editor,

I refer to the article by Alan Stretton 'Successes and Failures' Paper One; 'Some deficiencies in data on project successes and failures' published recently in PMWJ. I appreciated the read and look forward to later papers in the series. An examination of the reliability of project management as currently practiced is promised. As a function, project management is in many instances and in most sectors, conducted in ways that are too unreliable. And in its pursuit of measures for performance improvement, the issue receives scant attention from the project management community. Stretton's initiative here is encouraging.

I welcome readers being reminded of the scarcity of information to explain instances of low reliability as well as what it is that brings project success. Researchers and other commentators remain largely habituated to the analysis of the features of project management, rather than to examine ways for accomplishing their fusion, effective deployment and execution. There has been a preference for the disaggregation of issues, rather than for a greater understanding of project collaboration, integration, adaptation and implementation, through effective working practices and conduct. The root causes of project success and failure are I posit, can be attributed to a project regime's human and organisational behaviour; at least as it is from the way in which methodology, systems and procedures are applied.

Like Stretton, I find myself responding to the need for re-thinking project management practices: in my case this centres on human and organisational behaviour. My book 'The Single-Minded Project' was published in October 2014 by Gower. It offers a diagnosis of the strengths and weaknesses of project management practice today and proposes a series of approaches, methods and routes for improving a project's reliability and pace of progress.

Successes and failures are commonly identified at a macro level; recognising these as outcomes of a project endeavour. But they are also seen to be factors in judging a project's specific ideas, tactics, activities and events, as they are seen to impact on a

project's progress. Aside from externally imposed factors, project success is attributed to rigour and innovation and failures to errors and mistakes.

This prompts a dictum of project management practice and the acronym LEMPRI: 'Limiting Errors and Mistakes while Pursuing Rigour and Innovation'. We can all benefit from a surfeit of LEMPRI !

The book (extract below) argues that an understanding of project failure is a lesser source of project inspiration compared with the use of ideas generated from players' situation and circumstances and from their scrutiny, imagination, determination and resolve.

Extract from 'The Single-Minded Project'

p 53 **A Project's Strength**

Surveys of failure strongly outnumber reports that seek to understand the reasons for success. We know that failure can be characterised by 'failure modes' that trace common patterns of error, mistakes and difficulty; but any claim that the knowledge and ability needed to ensure success can be best acquired from an understanding of failures, rests on a weak argument. To learn retrospectively, expecting to advance a project management in this way is surely a mistake.

Such assumptions about the value of lessons learned might explain the frustration experienced by institutions, leaders and commentators when in pursuit of measures to achieve performance improvement. Any attempt to maximise the success of a project must surely seek novel thinking and practices, relying on new ideas and innovation more than on retrospective studies of failures and the weaknesses that are claimed to have caused them.

The players' sense of enterprise is an important ingredient of a project that is successful but it is an aspect of project management that continues to be under-stated. It is not a condition that is easily definable; but reports of economic growth by businesses based in the Far East reveal that their enduring sense of enterprise is a major factor and this is explicitly claimed by its local exponents.

And for projects characterised by significant complexity and uncertainty, we should be suspicious of any idea that there could be 'silver bullets' that will herald success. Once the 'hygiene factors' (an analogous reference here to Henry Herzberg's theory of motivation) are secured as a base-line capability, the factors that triumph over project adversity are those that are particular to a project regime. Distinctive, competitive and innovative project management is situation-specific rather than being attributable to compliance with declared professional standards or a recognised methodology.

Improvements to any management endeavour depend on the discovery and application of the most progressive thinking and ingenuity emerging from human and organisational behaviour. People's behaviour, whether working singly or in groups, maps the root causes of both difficulty and success (or 'risk'). Behaviours include creativity, carelessness, persistence, leadership, naivety, oversight, denial, dispute, collaboration,

social interaction, obfuscation, ambition, engagement, discipline, willingness, collaboration, political adroitness, ignorance and courage. All are derived from the unique qualities of people and their organisation.

p 54 The Single-Minded Project

To find a more coherent rationale for managing projects, readers may find that the principles and approaches that can be found in this book will offer some help. Comprehensive and insightful principles and practices addressing themselves to human behaviour are needed to complement methodology and other systematic schemas now promoted and deployed by project practitioners, often as universal formulae for this discipline. © Copyrighted Material

A pursuit of the how and why of failure and success could lead us to the 'pay dirt' that will reveal ways to help project management to become more robust. Let us hope so.

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