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Project Management needs a Higher Purpose
Part 4:The Future of Project Management and…
Editorial   by David L. Pells

Project Management needs a Higher Purpose!

Part 4: The Future of Project Management, Some Questions, Some Suggestions, First Things First and What's it to be? [1]

David L. Pells

Introduction

In late December 2020, I authored a long editorial as a follow-on to my June 2020 editorial on black elephants[2]. On good advice, that long editorial was broken into four parts so that a few more readers might make it to the end. This is the fourth part. For those interested in reading the long editorial in one sitting, it has been posted in the PM World Library.[3]

In part 1 published in January, I introduced the topic and referred to my June black elephants editorial in which I discussed the Covid-19 pandemic, climate change and other global problems (the black elephants that everyone knows about but few seem to want to address) and what the PM professional world could (or should) be doing to help. In February's part 2, I discussed mission statements, social responsibility and the 'rogue black elephant', corruption. In part 3 last month, I asked some questions such as if the planet is destroyed or civil society collapses, what good is a free market, productivity, projects or project management? What is project success, if the wrong projects are initiated, even if completed to scope, schedule and cost? Shouldn't the right projects also be good projects? Does governance really work?

This month I again ask some hard questions, offer some suggestions and challenge the PM professional world. But please don't forget the questions raised in the previous segments of this editorial. Covid-19 vaccinations are increasing, yet infections and hospitalizations are rising again in many places (and running rampant in Brazil). The world needs more vaccinations and healthcare projects to be delivered faster. The impact of climate change continues to grow, as we've seen recently with torrential rainfall and flooding in Australia[4] and a record setting heat wave across Europe this week.[5] More drought and fires are forecast for the Southwestern United States this year[6] and the 2021 Atlantic hurricane season is projected to be another active one.[7]

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[2] Pells, D. L. (2020). Black Elephants and … maybe Project Management. *PM World Journal*, Vol. IX, Issue VI, June. https://pmworldlibrary.net/wp-content/uploads/2020/06/pmwj94-Jun2020-Pells-black-elephants-and-maybe-project-management-editorial3.pdf

[3] https://pmworldlibrary.net/wp-content/uploads/2021/01/pmwj101-Jan2021-Pells-project-management-needs-a-higher-purpose-editorial-January-complete2.pdf

[4] https://earthobservatory.nasa.gov/images/148093/historic-floods-in-new-south-wales

[5] https://www.washingtonpost.com/weather/2021/04/01/europe-record-warm-heat/

[6] https://www.redzone.co/2021/02/10/wildfire-outlook-july-2020-2-2/

[7] https://www.accuweather.com/en/hurricane/accuweathers-2021-atlantic-hurricane-season-forecast/924431

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Perhaps the most serious issue related to the black elephants is the impact on children around the world. The Covid-19 Pandemic has had a devasting impact on education, with the World Bank estimating that the education of 1.6 billion children has been disrupted[8]. Healthcare, nutrition, housing shortages among families and children have increased; homelessness among children has increased in America[9]; unaccompanied children are crossing the US border with Mexico in record numbers.[10]

There are of course many other global problems to worry about, and to seek solutions to. Keep in mind that most solutions will involve programs and projects, so why shouldn't project management experts be involved in planning and leading those efforts. I was very heartened to see Alan Stretton jump into this issue with his February paper titled "Towards extending the scope of project-related management to help address climate change and other global problems". (Stretton 2021b0[11] Alan was responding directly to my editorial. Please also see Bob Prieto's reaction with his brilliant featured paper last month titled "Reversing Global Warming". (Prieto 2021) Several others have weighed in; I hope others will do so as well.

Meanwhile let's start this final segment with thoughts on the future of project management.

The Future of PM – a Few Comments

The future of project management seems to be everyone's favorite topic these days. Dozens of articles are published early each year with authors predicting trends and developments for the coming one, five or ten years. But what about projects and project management in 10, 20 or 50 years, if the planet is unlivable or civil society collapses, in one or more countries?

Advancing project management is obviously still very important – more and better knowledge; better models, methods, tools; global standards; more qualified project managers and PM professionals. But why are these advances important? As pointed out by many already, the project management discipline has historically been primarily focused on implementation, as a means to an end, rather than on project outcomes, which should always be more important it seems to me.

To help think about this topic, I revisited Peter Morris' classic 2013 book, *Reconstructing Project Management*. The book is full of PM history, best practices, new information, perspective, wisdom and many relevant statements; so I quote: "*Managing projects effectively is not just a question of having the right people organized in a manner appropriate to the characteristics of the project and the environment it is in. Nor is it just a question of using project management tools and techniques. There is something about the 'why' and 'how' one does projects; the 'to what end?'; I've called this 'the project management ethos.*" (p. 257)

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[8] https://www.unicef.org/press-releases/new-global-tracker-measure-pandemics-impact-education-worldwide
[9] https://endhomelessness.org/homelessness-in-america/who-experiences-homelessness/children-and-families/
[10] https://www.bbc.com/news/world-us-canada-56405009
[11] https://pmworldlibrary.net/wp-content/uploads/2021/01/pmwj102-Feb2021-Stretton-extending-project-related-management-to-help-address-global-problems.pdf

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and "..*while mankind faces some of the biggest, most serious and dangerous issues in its history, project and program management as a discipline are almost totally silent on addressing them. We should look, as a discipline, at this. What does the future hold?"* (p.270) and "*How might project, program or portfolio management help society to address these and similar challenges, and how will these changes affect the practice of m.o.p/p3m? It will be no surprise to see that most of the direction is set via policy decisions taken prior to portfolio, program or project management kicking in… m.o.p/p3m does have a value-enhancing role, inputting implementation perspectives to policy creation and strategy formulation, and in this way it can positively contribute to addressing society's challenges.*" (p. 273) (Morris 2013) Peter was thinking about these things long before he authored his important report on climate change for APM four years later. (Morris 2017)

So how can project management really influence strategies and project selection? It's already happening with portfolio management in general and in some industries. Alan Stretton has also recently provided some examples and a model for PM involvement in the strategic formulation and reformulation processes. (Stretton 2019, 2020a)[12] I would go a step further and suggest that PM have some influence on organizational vision and missions by raising the issues of social responsibility and ethics.

This raises another serious issue in my mind: almost all discussion for projects and PM related to strategic planning, including portfolio management, has been focused on business organizations, the commercial sector. It seems to me that government and public entities and most civil institutions, the so-called 3rd sector, (nonprofits, churches, schools, etc.) have not been fully served and even highly underserved by the PM professional world. And it is governmental and civil organizations that are directly engaged in addressing the black elephants, the topics covered by the SDGs.

So here are some predictions (that I hope come true):

➢ Projects will be recognized as more important than project management, leading to "management of projects" (MoP) as the driving force.
➢ As projectization of both industry and society continues to grow, the wide variety of programs and projects will lead to wider recognition of the importance of 'context', as well as experience and competence, in PM.
➢ Technology trends such as digitalization, big data analysis, Artificial Intelligence (AI) and others will dramatically impact projects & PM in many industries, but not all. Traditional PM will continue to be used (and required) in many industries. While PMI and others focus on PM in the business and technology sectors, dirt farming, food production, house building, infrastructure and many other basic

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[12] https://pmworldlibrary.net/wp-content/uploads/2020/05/pmwj94-Jun2020-Stretton-further-notes-ppm-involvement-in-choosing-right-projects.pdf

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industries and activities will continue. More applicable models and processes will be used or developed for those contexts and needs.

- Programs and projects in the public and civil sectors will demand more attention, as local, regional and global social problems increase (as shown during the Covid-19 pandemic.)
- As knowledge about climate change grows, and the awareness of sustainability increases, program and project lifecycles will be incorporated into asset lifecycles extending to end-of-life disposal considerations – long terms BRM and ROI.
- As the importance of solving global problems increases, more social responsibility will be incorporated into organizational strategies, goals, selection and characterization of programs and projects.
- PM organizations and leaders will recognize that ethical behavior does not stop with professionals but should be true for everyone we work with and do business with. The PM professional world must take a more visible stand against corruption, in all its forms, everywhere.
- PM guides, methods, models, processes, systems and standards will need to increase and change to keep up.

To quote Antonio Nieto-Rodriguez, former Chair of the PMI Board of Directors and author of *Lead Successful Projects*, *The Project Revolution* and *The Focused Organization*: "*I firmly believe that we have a unique opportunity to both re-invent leadership and re-invent project management. That we go back to the initial values and human beliefs and that we improve them to address the current and future needs of our planet. And the best way to do it is through inspirational projects and strategic initiatives*…"[13]

As Reinhard Wagner, IPMA chair has recently written: "*recent years have also shown that it is time to strengthen international cooperation in order to meet the many challenges of our time… The Covid-19 pandemic shows, as if under a magnifying glass, that these problems cannot be solved in the narrow context of national boundaries but can only be overcome through international cooperation. This is equally true for the worsening climate crisis, waves of migration and refugees, and regional conflicts…A societal agenda is needed, helping us to focus on what really matters and helps to shape our future.*"[14]

Will the future of project management include more attention to solving social and environmental problems? Will the "right" projects include doing more "good" projects? Will governance include more attention to social responsibility, anti-corruption and broader social value? Will the focus of the PM professional world dramatically expand beyond business interests and economic measures?

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[13] From page 2 in Insights Report: Project Management After Covid-19, edited by Ipek Sahra Ozguler, *PM World Journal*, May 2020; https://pmworldlibrary.net/wp-content/uploads/2020/04/pmwj93-May2020-Ozguler-project-management-after-covid-19-Report.pdf
[14] https://www.ipma.world/project-based-cooperation-at-global-level-as-a-condition-for-mastering-current-and-future-challenges/

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Some Questions

- Do you agree with the (any of the) points made above?
- Do you think that professional PM could have helped or still can help deal with the Covid-19 Pandemic?
- Do you think Climate Change is real, or that the PM professional field has any responsibility to help deal with it?
- Do you think there is something we can (or should) do to help the world address the Black Elephants?
- Should PM professional organizations like PMI, APM, IPMA, AIPM, AACE more actively (and visibly) embrace social responsibility?
- Do you think PM is more important than the projects you work on?
- Do you think the PM profession can have an impact on global corruption?

Some suggestions

One obvious question that I had when I began thinking about this whole topic, a higher purpose for PM, was whether it could be a top-down or bottoms-up movement. Since there is no organization that represents the entire PM professional world, top-down is currently unfeasible. International cooperation, however, is certainly possible. There are also some things that professional organizations and individuals can do. Here are a few:

For PM Professional Organizations

- Take a position on social responsibility, and especially regarding the issues raised in this editorial (part 3 last month). Evaluate vision and mission statements, and adjust accordingly, or create new ones.
- Add social responsibility (or SDG) reviews to governance models and guides.
- Increase focus on programs, projects, outcomes and benefits, not just on PM.
- Consider modifying program and project lifecycles to fit inside organization, asset or product life cycles, to better highlight outcomes, benefits and sustainability (both environmental and social).
- Take a more visible stand against corruption and unethical behavior in industry, government and civil society. Update ethical standards to include "no condoning of corrupt behaviour, including lying, cheating or stealing.
- Reach out to governments to advance professional and ethical PM standards, knowledge, education and performance. Passive approaches are no longer appropriate. (Some are already doing so; others should start)
- Increase cooperation and partnerships with other professional associations and organizations to advance the use of modern project and program management for solving global (social) problems faster and more effectively.
- Reach out and partner with institutions in civil society to help address local and regional problems (black elephants).
- Establish interest groups, networks and special projects to help solve environmental and social problems.
- Promote and support academic research into such solutions.

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For Individual Professionals

There are plenty of things we can do as individuals; here are just a few:

- Reconsider the project or program that you are working on. Is it aligned with corporate strategy? Have social or environmental impacts been considered during project planning? If not, consider raising those issues. Do any other issues mentioned in this paper apply?
- Consider your organization. Is there a visible commitment to professional ethics? Is there or has there been unethical behavior, including untruthful reporting to stakeholders? Take action as appropriate, but don't stay silent.
- Review standards for ethical behavior and recommit yourself to professional ethics, and to my expanded definition of corruption. Don't lie, cheat or condone ANYONE who does.
- Advocate for the changes noted above with leaders of your local, national or international professional association.
- Volunteer with your professional society to advance one or more of these issues, for example, help create a new role, SIG or program for social responsibility or to support local communities. Or volunteer with a civil society organization to benefit the environment or local community.

But first things first: PM for Emergencies & Disaster Response

As the Covid-19 pandemic has made clear to everyone, we need to be better prepared for emergencies. Emergency and disaster responses are projects; some become massive programs such as the response and rebuilding after a hurricane – or in response to this dangerous virus. Why isn't the project management professional world more actively engaged in these programs and projects?

Bob Prieto has authored papers on responding to big disasters (events of scale) in this journal. (Prieto 2010, 2011, 2013). I have also written extensively on this topic over the years, as explained in my Black Elephants editorial (Pells 2020). But now I've realized that I was thinking about this topic from the wrong angle. There is extensive experience, knowledge and expertise related to emergencies and disaster responses among government agencies (national and international), first responders (fire, police, emergency medical, defense, security and other organizations), civil society bodies (churches, non-profits, other) and some industries (construction, for example).

The PM profession should partner with some (or all) of those organizations to capture and document their knowledge in the context of project management bodies of knowledge or guides for emergency response project management. Perhaps more than one topic area, for example, medical emergencies (pandemic, cholera, other); natural disasters (hurricanes, fires, floods); environmental emergencies (chemical spills, plant explosions, etc.); aftermath of conflicts/wars (refugee crisis, other). This is an application area where Agility is really needed, where agile decision making and action taking can save lives and help mitigate more damage. But I'm not talking about scrum teams of 5, 10, or 20 people;

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emergency responses often require dozens of organizations and hundreds of people working together, often across borders, and involving very rapid planning, massive logistics and extensive safety, medical, health, security and other skills. Agility of a whole other dimension!

If we want to be socially responsible by contributing our expertise for responding to emergencies, then I think every PM organization should establish an emergency response initiative, program, organizational element, SIG or network. Those teams could reach out to local and national emergency responders, better understand emergency response requirements, needs and processes, and begin to capture that knowledge. Guides should be produced, courses developed and conferences sponsored. This could also become a large career field for project management professionals; and all emergency responders everywhere should be educated about project management. The numbers and impact of natural disasters and their associated emergencies are only increasing. So why not?

So What's it to Be?

I think the PM profession needs a higher purpose. I think the purpose of project management should be to help achieve important projects and programs that serve society, achieve positive changes, contribute to a better future for more people and for the planet. I also don't think I'm alone in this thinking; for example, see Reinhard Wagner's recent articles and papers (Wagner 2020a, 2020b, 2020c)

But we need to decide both individually and collectively, what projects do we want to achieve? What are the "right" projects in our organizations? In order to stop the black elephants, I think we need to climb on our collective high horses and meet the charge. Take the proverbial bull (elephant) by the horns! The world needs help. Why shouldn't project and program managers, who know how to get things done, be more involved?

Have a safe, healthy and successful 2021!

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David L. Pells, PMI Fellow, HonFAPM, ISIPM, PMA, SOVNET is Managing Editor and publisher of the **PM World Journal** (www.pmworldjournal.com) and Managing Director of the PM World Library (www.pmworldlibrary.net). David is an internationally recognized leader in the field of professional project management with more than 40 years of experience on a variety of programs and projects, including engineering, construction, energy, defense, transit, technology and nuclear security, and project sizes ranging from thousands to billions of dollars. He occasionally acts as project management advisor for U.S. national laboratories and international programs, and currently serves as an independent advisor for a major U.S. national security program.

David Pells has been an active professional leader in the United States since the 1980s, as founder and president of several PMI chapters, founder of PMI's first SIG (Project Earth), and member of the PMI board of directors twice. He was founder and chair of the Global Project Management Forum (1995-2000), an annual meeting of leaders of PM associations from around the world. David was awarded PMI's Person of the Year award in 1998 and Fellow Award, PMI's highest honor, in 1999. He is also an Honorary Fellow of the Association for Project Management (APM) in the UK; the Instituto Italiano di Project Management (ISIMP - Italy); Project Management Associates (PMA - India); and the Russian Project Management Association (SOVNET). In 2010 he was made an honorary member of the Project Management Association of Nepal.

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