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Rediscovering innovation in project management
Prof Darren Dalcher
Series Article

Advances in Project Management Series

Rediscovering innovation in project management: A post-crisis perspective [1]

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Over the last two years our world has changed dramatically as a result of the Covid-19 pandemic, forcing a recalibration of norms and behaviours. Yet, the need to respond urgently, and engage with rescue and recovery activities means there has been very little time to think about the changing nature of projects. As humanity seeks to re-establish a new normal it becomes important to reflect on what we have learned during this turbulent period.

The responses of different countries across the globe have reshaped civilisation in unprecedented ways and may suggest new opportunities for societal engagement and the delivery of meaningful change. What then are the lessons for project management? We have witnessed the results of exercising disaster management and rapid recovery projects on a global scale, often with spectacular results. Two years ago it would have been unthinkable that most schools would be closed, billions would be out of work, individuals would be confined to their homes, all children would be home educated, our elders would be locked up, food and toilet paper would disappear from shelves, landlords would not collect rent, banks would suspend mortgage payments, public gatherings would be banned, governments would put together the largest economic stimulus packages seen in a generation in order to maintain national economies and the homeless would be housed in hotels. Yet, it is increasingly clear once again that crises can rapidly reshape society, the economy and life as we know it.

Many of the urgent projects we have seen around us were borne out of crisis. A crisis is a wakeup call. Crisis situations are extreme because they threaten our very survival, creating an overwhelming urgency to resolve them. Even more so, when the crisis is both ubiquitous and constantly emerging as it unfolds and plays out at full speed in a social media infused world. The current pandemic has shaken many of the foundations and deeply held conventions underpinning society, economy and government. The unique power of a crisis is in making the familiar shatter almost instantaneously. Ian Mitroff (2018) notes that beyond the immediate harm wreaked by a crisis, there is a more insidious impact with an existential component, where all the important assumptions, the notions of what might be safe and the deeply held models become invalid all at once.

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The impact of a crisis can be likened to a rogue wave striking a ship in deep seas; sudden, spontaneous and significant. The response to an emerging crisis necessitates a near continuous stream of urgent and unexpected mini-projects; characterised by immediate decisions, plans that must be created and enacted in a matter of hours – or minutes – and an immediate reversal of our conservative aversion to risk taking and abolition of an excessive reliance on speculative business cases.

The results have been nothing less than spectacular: In our haste to respond to the emergency, we uncovered new abilities to work together, to embrace new technologies, to collaborate and to achieve the impossible. The radical shifts that normally define transformation appear to have been mastered by society: Hospitals built in ten days, new vaccines in circulation within a matter of weeks, education systems moving online at the switch of a button, and significant changes to all forms of human interaction, communication and collaboration. Indeed, rather than find our new leaders for times of crisis, we instead rediscovered a new society ready to band together.

Peter Drucker famously observed that '*the greatest danger in times of turbulence is not the turbulence, it is to act with yesterday's logic*'. Perhaps our greatest challenge beyond the pandemic would be to retain the newly rediscovered sense of innovation beyond the immediate scope of the crisis and to embrace the new spirit of inclusivity, co-operation and creativity that it engendered. To prepare for the challenges of a more turbulent and volatile tomorrow, we would therefore need to harvest the hard-won insights from our recent experiences.

The experience of working in more demanding contexts will require new positioning, including increased attention to the following aspects (see Table 1):

Table 1: The 7Ps of Work Framework

Purpose:	Increased primacy of meaning, needs, purpose and value creation
People:	Greater orientation on self, employees, customers, community and society
Place:	Proliferation of remote, flexible and homeworking modes away from the office
Platform:	Adoption of on-line platforms to compete with face-to-face communication
Perspective:	Embracing a longer-term horizon will underpin stewardship and greater responsibility for the future
Pragmatism:	Experimentation, testing and adaptation will remain essential to flourishing in a fast-changing world
Professionalism:	Reflection-in-practice and the ability to cope and make sense of turbulent, volatile, novel and ambiguous conditions

Sadly, the new positioning, capabilities and ways of working may be required sooner than we would wish for. The war in the Ukraine is upending our world with similar lessons to be learned and applied. Other challenges abound, including sustainable development, clean water, population growth, resource availability and energy security. There is also the recurring threat of new global pandemics and re-emerging diseases.

How do we begin to tackle such enormous challenges? The recent pandemic has taught us one very important lesson that fundamental change at a global level may still be attainable. The new positioning and the 7Ps foster a range of new mindsets and perspectives required to engage with the challenges in meaningful ways. Underpinning it all is our willingness to continue to initiate, invent and innovate as project management re-discovers its way and its place in supporting, enhancing and sustaining society through significant and meaningful change (Dalcher, 2022).

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Professor Dalcher has written over 300 papers and book chapters on project management and software engineering. He is Editor-in-Chief of *Journal of Software: Evolution and Process,* a leading international software engineering journal. He is the editor of the book series, *Advances in Project Management*, published by Routledge and of the companion series *Fundamentals of Project Management*. Heavily involved in a variety of research projects and subjects, Professor Dalcher has built a reputation as leader and innovator in the areas of practice-based education and reflection in project management. He works with many major industrial and commercial organisations and government bodies.

Darren is an Honorary Fellow of the APM, a Chartered Fellow of the British Computer Society, a Fellow of the Chartered Management Institute, and the Royal Society of Arts, a Senior Member of the Institute of Electrical and Electronic Engineers, a Senior Fellow of the Higher Education Academy and a Member of the Project Management Institute (PMI), the British Academy of Management and the International Council on Systems Engineering. He is a Chartered IT Practitioner. He sits on numerous senior research and professional boards, including The PMI Academic Insight Team, the CMI Academic Council and the APM Group Ethics and Standards Governance Board as well as the British Library Management Book of the Year Panel. He is the Academic Advisor, author and co-Editor of the highly influential 7th edition of the APM Body of Knowledge. Prof Dalcher is an academic advisor for the *PM World Journal*. He can be contacted at d.dalcher@lancaster.ac.uk.