

Commentary on “higher purposes” for project management, via partnering to tackle broad societal / environmental issues¹

By Alan Stretton

INTRODUCTION

David Pells’ May 2022 editorial “The war changes everything ...” (Pells 2022) referred back to the “PM needs a higher purpose” theme of his four-part 2021 editorial (Pells 2021) in which he discussed a very wide range of local, regional and global societal and crises response issues. A key theme of both Pells’ editorials is that project management could, and should, take much more prominent “higher purpose” positions with many of these issues. This commentary focuses on one approach to facilitating this.

In thinking further about “higher purposes” for project management, I remain concerned that some project management writers continue to infer, directly or indirectly, that project management can and should make its own decisions about tackling societal and crises issues. The reality is that it is only very rarely that it can do this. Decisions that initiate actions on societal or crises issues are habitually made by other parties.

Yet, project management can certainly have what Morris 2013 describes as a “value-enhancing role inputting implementation perspectives to policy creation and strategy formulation”. It would therefore appear that one type of “higher purpose” for project management would be to enter into some forms of partnerships with societal-issue initiators or crises responders to engage directly in these decision making processes.

However, forming such partnerships has proven to be easier said than done. The main impediment appears to be a wide-spread lack of awareness by societal/ crises decision makers of the potential for project management to help them, particularly in the early, and often most critical, stages. Further, this lack of awareness all too often also extends into ongoing implementation stages, as Pells 2021a examples in relation to six highly visible and very major programs/projects undertaken during the pandemic.

Therefore, a primary prerequisite for project management to achieve “higher purpose” partnerships with key societal/crises parties would be to greatly enhance their awareness of the potential for project management to add real value to their initial decision making, and to subsequent actions. This commentary discusses three approaches to enhancing such awareness – which, in turn, would substantially facilitate the development of “higher purpose” partnerships between project management and societal-issue-initiator and/or crises-responder groups/institutions.

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OVERVIEW OF PM’S POSITION RE INITIATIVES TO SERVE SOCIETY ETC

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 most people and for the planet.
(Pells 2021d)

PM is rarely in a position to make its own decisions about society-serving initiatives or initial responses to crises

Referring to the lead quotation, its implication is that helping achieve projects that serve society, etc., could constitute a “higher purpose” for project management. However, PM rarely has any say in the decision processes that establish just what societal-issue initiatives, or responses to crises, will be undertaken. These initiating decisions are normally made by other parties. Therefore, PM is not normally in a position to make its own decisions on instigating such “higher purpose” initiatives.

How could project management become closely involved in such society-serving decision processes, and thence in decisions about its own “higher purpose” initiatives?

It seems highly doubtful that project management could do this on its own. As Morris 2013:273 says, project and program management “are essentially implementation disciplines”. They simply do not normally include such high-level decision making as integral parts of their scope of practice. Indeed, to do so would be to extend the scope of project management far beyond its currently perceived boundaries.

However, PM has value-adding partnering potential in society-serving decisions

Morris 2013:273 points to PM’s value-adding potential to help society as follows.

Nevertheless, as we argued in Chapter 20, mop/p3m does have a value-enhancing role in putting implementation perspectives to policy creation and strategy formulation, and in this way it can positively contribute to addressing society’s challenges.

Morris clearly implies that PM has value-adding potential if it enters into appropriate types of partnering arrangements with organisations which actually make the society-serving decisions.

A higher purpose for PM could be partnering with specific society-serving groups

From an internal PM perspective, the potential for win-win partnering arrangements between PM and groups/institutions that make decisions about, and/or are responsible for, addressing society’s challenges, is more than a little obvious.

Pells 2021a discusses many partnering arrangements which have been made in philanthropic mode in recent times at a relatively modest level, including for example PMI’s Education Foundation partnering with such organisations as Children International.

However, the main theme of Pells’ editorial goes well beyond such modest philanthropic initiatives. He suggests that PM organisations should aspire to enter into much broader and higher-level partnering arrangements, as exemplified for instance in Pells 2021d:

- Reach out and partner with institutions in civil society to help address local and regional problems

Pells also suggests partnering possibilities to help solve high level global problems.

However, benefits from partnering with PM organisations appear to be far from obvious for most such relevant groups/institutions, such as societal-issue initiators or crises responders. The primary impediment to forming such partnerships appears to be lack of awareness by these groups/institutions of the potential for project management to add value to their activities – as now discussed in more detail.

INITIATORS/RESPONDERS ARE OFTEN UNAWARE OF PM POTENTIAL TO HELP

Lack of awareness of potential for PM to help with early what-and-how decisions

The most prominent impediment to bringing about appropriate partnering arrangements is almost certainly lack of awareness on the part of many, if not most, society-serving groups/institutions of the potential for project management to help them in making decisions about what initiatives to undertake, and how to go about implementing them – for example along the lines indicated in the above quotation from Morris 2013.

Remedying this situation would appear to require education/awareness-type programs well beyond the scale of any such efforts previously undertaken by project management. But we will return to this, and other possibilities for enhancing awareness, later.

Lack of early engagement of PM to help coordinate disaster recovery initiatives

Recent flood disasters in northern NSW in Australia in late February and again in late March 2022 are prime examples where lack of early appointment of a project manager (or an equivalent coordinator/integrator), contributed to chaotic, fragmented and uncoordinated initial responses to two successive catastrophic floods. The local people did some wonderful work with little outside help, but their efforts would have been so much more effective if they had had an appointed leader, such as a PM, to help early mobilisation and coordination of both local and external resources. (Even better would be a standing disaster-management authority, as suggested by the local MP, J. Saffin)

Part of the reason for an absence of such early engagement was almost certainly political, caused by lack of clarity about responsibilities between the NSW state government and the Commonwealth government, and the consequent unwillingness of either to take full responsibility from the outset. This example is in sharp contrast to how another major disaster, this time from a tropical cyclone, was handled many years ago.

An example of a timely and effective disaster relief leadership appointment

When Cyclone Tracy devastated Darwin in northern Australia in December 1974, the Commonwealth Government immediately appointed Major General Alan Stretton (no relation to the author) to coordinate emergency responses on the spot in Darwin. He was only in this position for a short time, but his leadership role in the initial marshalling and coordination of all available resources was universally regarded as crucial to the longer term success of the Darwin response.

Stretton was not a professional project manager, but the function he undertook so successfully was that of an integrative program leader. Sadly, that particular lesson has been forgotten (or ignored) with so many subsequent “natural” disasters in Australia.

Failures to engage PM effectively even in later implementation stages

We also have had many Australian examples of failure to engage PM in the actual processes of implementing certain types of society-serving initiatives, in spite of the fact that implementation is the natural and habitual operational arena of project management. These include examples in emergencies and disaster responses, where you might expect that project management would be naturally called upon to participate.

But Australia does not appear to be alone in these matters, as indicated for example in Pells 2021d, where he asks the question,

Why isn't the project management professional world more actively engaged in these [emergency and disaster response] programs and projects?

The answer to Pells' above question appears to be obvious. The groups/ institutions responsible for making decisions about society-serving initiatives are simply not aware of the potential help they can get from project management. But how can PM convince these responsible entities that they, and society, would benefit from the inputting of PM implementation perspectives when making “what and how” decisions, and from the active engagement of project management in the actual implementation processes?

POSSIBILITIES TO ENHANCE AWARENESS OF PM PARTNERING POTENTIAL

Undertake specifically tailored education/awareness-type programs

Lack of awareness of the potential benefits from linking with PM is extremely widespread. Most external entities perceive PM as an execution-delivery-only avocation. An early step in changing this perception would be to augment the latter understanding by including the role project management can, and often does, play in various front-end phases of project and strategic life cycles – including inputting project implementation perspectives into decision making processes about choice of strategic initiatives, and on how to best progress them.

As noted above, this situation would require education/awareness-type programs which go well beyond the scale of any such efforts previously undertaken by project management. Such efforts would appear to require specifically tailored education/awareness-type programs for the relevant entities that make particular types of decisions on society-serving initiatives.

However, even with such education/awareness programs, it could still be extremely difficult to really convince initiators/responders. It would be a good deal easier if PM could offer them some contributions which were specifically relevant to their particular types of initiatives, right from the outset.

But what kinds of specifically relevant contributions could be developed and offered?

Offer amalgamated documentation of actual societal/crises experiences of others

Pells 2021d discusses one kind of documentation-related contribution in the specific context of emergencies and disaster responses. He introduces this as follows.

There is extensive experience, knowledge and experience 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).

Pells goes on to suggest the following type of documentation-oriented type of partnering arrangement with responding organisations.

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, others); natural disasters (hurricanes, fires, floods); environmental emergencies (chemical spills, plant explosions, etc.); aftermath of conflicts/wars (refugee crisis, other).

There would certainly be a strong incentive for emergency responders to partner with PM organisations that have documented and codified the cumulative experience of others in the same type of emergency situation.

Offer specific hands-on experience in relevant societal/crises domain(s)

Further, if a commercial PM organisation has undertaken all the work of documenting/codifying others' experience in a particular area, that organisation would be a natural candidate for also actively offering and undertaking hands-on project management services in that area. This would make it an even stronger candidate for emergency responders to be motivated to partner with.

I don't know how practicable it would be for PM organisations to commit to undertaking this type of detailed documentation in the current environment. Are there sufficient numbers of specific types of emergencies to warrant PM organisations specialising in responses to them? I don't know the answer to this question, but observe that the way things are going in this world of ours, this is, or may well become, quite likely. For example, with regard to the northern NSW floods discussed above, the local state member of Parliament has called for a standing disaster-management authority to be developed. There are likely to be other such calls, which, combined, could well convince some PM organisations in this country to specialise accordingly.

Perhaps we have a bit of a chicken-and-egg situation here. Perhaps those PM organisations which have documented the experiences of others in a particular field could be invited into a partnership arrangement which would go beyond providing advice, and include some active participation. If this were to happen, the relevant PM organisations could build up a reputation which would greatly enhance prospects for it to be approached by initiators/responders to form partnerships to deal with specific initiatives/crises.

HIGHER PURPOSE PM PARTNERING WITH “AWARE” SOCIETAL-ISSUE GROUPS

It has been argued above that a higher purpose for project management could be to partner with appropriate society-serving groups to best help tackle many types of local, regional and/or global issues. The main challenge in achieving this type of higher purpose is to make such groups fully aware of the potential for PM to really help them in initial decision making, as well as with ongoing implementation.

Three broad approaches to increasing such awareness have been suggested. The most effective approach would be for the PM organisation to be able to offer its own previous hands-on experience with the particular social issue or type of emergency confronting the society-serving group. A somewhat less effective, but still potentially influential, approach would be for the PM organisation to be able to offer consolidated documentation of the experience of other organisations in undertaking the relevant type of issue being addressed. A third approach, which would not offer such immediately specific benefits, but a broader awareness, would be to undertake specifically tailored education/ awareness-type programs with relevant society-serving groups.

Pursuing one or more of the above approaches would facilitate the achievement of one type of PM “higher purpose”, by partnering with appropriated groups to tackle broad societal/ environmental issues. This would appear to be a very appropriate “higher purpose” for those PM organisations that had the desire, skills and perseverance to pursue this path of advancing “positive changes in the world”, as Pells 2021a has expressed it.

SUMMARY/DISCUSSION

The arguments put forward in this commentary can be summarised as follows.

- The commentary related to Pells’ four-part 2021 editorial “Project management needs a higher purpose”.
- Pells looked at a very wide range of local, regional and global societal and environment issues as potential domains for PM to achieve “higher purposes”.
- There are some PM writers who infer, directly or indirectly, that project management can and should make its own decisions about tackling societal and crises issues.
- The reality is that this very rarely happens. Decisions that initiate actions on societal or crises issues are habitually made by other parties.
- However, PM has the potential to add value to such decisions, particularly by inputting implementation perspectives
- Therefore one type of “higher purpose” for PM would be to participate directly in such decisions by partnering with societal-issue initiators and/or crises responders
- However, forming such partnerships has proven difficult, mainly because of lack of awareness by many societal/ crises decision makers of the potential help from PM, particularly in the early, and often most critical, stages. This lack of awareness also often extends into ongoing implementation stages.
- Therefore, a primary prerequisite for PM to achieve “higher purpose” partnerships with key societal/crises parties would be to greatly enhance their awareness of the potential for PM to add real value to initial decision making, and subsequent actions.
- The following possible approaches to enhancing such awareness, in order of increasing effectiveness, were proposed.
 - Undertake specifically tailored education/awareness-type programs
 - Offer amalgamated documentation of actual societal/crises experiences of others
 - Offer specific hands-on experience in relevant societal/crises domains
- Pursuing one or more of the above approaches would facilitate the achievement of a PM “higher purpose” of partnering with groups/institutions that make decisions about, and/or are responsible for, addressing society’s challenges.

This article has focused on the latter type of partnering-related PM “higher purpose”. However, this is not the only type of partnering arrangement that PM organisations could pursue. Another is proposed by Pells 2021d, in which he suggests that PM professional organisations could undertake a different type of partnering, as follows.

Increase cooperation and partnerships with other professional associations and organizations to advance the use of modern project and program management techniques for solving global (social) problems faster and more effectively/

There are undoubtedly other ways in which project management can pursue “higher purposes” to advance “positive changes in the world”. However, the partnership route appears to me to be the most promising one, which is the main reason for my offering this commentary.

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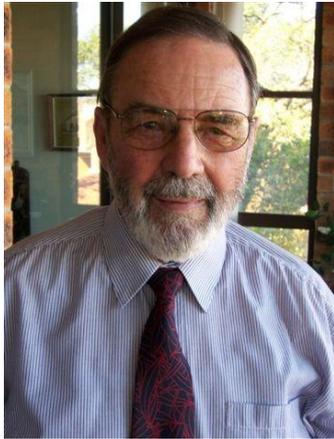
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Alan has degrees in Civil Engineering (BE, Tasmania) and Mathematics (MA, Oxford), and an honorary PhD in strategy, programme and project management (ESC, Lille, France). Alan was Chairman of the Standards (PMBOK) Committee of the Project Management Institute (PMI®) from late 1989 to early 1992. He held a similar position with the Australian Institute of Project Management (AIPM), and was elected a Life Fellow of AIPM in 1996. He was a member of the Core Working Group in the development of the Australian National Competency Standards for Project Management. He has published over 240 professional articles and papers. Alan can be contacted at alanailene@bigpond.com.au.

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