

Mindful Project Management Helps Deal with Uncertainty

Interview with Elmar Kutsch ^{1,2}

Author, Project Manager, Associate Professor
Cranfield School of Management
Bedfordshire, UK



Interviewed by Spring

Journalist, Project Management Review: PMR (China)
International Correspondent, PM World Journal

Introduction to the interviewee

Elmar Kutsch is Associate Professor in Risk Management, Cranfield School of Management, UK. Previously, he held a variety of commercial and senior management positions within the Information Technology (IT) industry. As a passionate skydiver and former project manager, his interests, both privately and professionally, revolve around the management of risk and uncertainty. He authored the book *The Art of Organisational Resilience: Revisiting the Fall of France in 1940* and *Mindful Project Management*.

¹ This interview was first published in PMR, Project Management Review magazine earlier this year. It is republished here with the permission of PMR. The PM World Journal maintains a cooperative relationship with PMR, periodically republishing works from each other's publications. To see the original interview with Chinese introduction, visit PMR at <http://www.pmreview.com.cn/english/>

² How to cite this interview: PMR (2022). Mindful Project Management Helps Deal with Uncertainty: Interview with Elmar Kutsch; *Project Management Review*; republished in the *PM World Journal*, Vol. XI, Issue VII, July.

Interview

Part I Mindful Project Management

Q1. Why did you and Mark Hall write the book *Mindful Project Management*? To be brief, what is the book mainly about?

Elmar Kutsch (Kutsch): The profession of project management is defined by frameworks that promote deterministic, probabilistic, reductionist, best case thinking. In other words, the current focus and obsession with planning predispose us, project managers, to see situations in a particular way; they anchor our thoughts into our past's successes. As a consequence, we are less likely to detect and prepare ourselves for future failures.

Mindful project management takes us beyond the tangible and the measurable aleatoric uncertainty and makes us embrace the truly unknown and unknowable epistemic uncertainty. In contrast to conventional project management characterized by processes, tools and techniques, mindful project management is all about fostering situated human cognition.

Q2. What does "Mindful Thinking" mean? What application does it have in project management?

Kutsch: To quote Ellen Langer, "a mindful response to a particular situation is not an attempt to make the best choice from among available options but to create options." In other words, whereas conventional project management makes us "recycle" past-informed situations, decisions and routines, a mindful approach to managing a project is to notice, interpret, prepare, contain, and recover from novel situations, to manage a project beyond the risk horizon. As much as conventional project management relies on hindsight, mindful project management fosters foresight.

Part II Resilient Project Managers

Q3. How do you define "Resilience"? What are qualities of resilient project managers?

Kutsch: Although there is no unified definition of Resilience in literature, the one most aligned to mindful project management is one of bouncing back and bouncing forward.

The qualities of a resilient project manager is not to give in to the temptation to manage a project on "autopilot". In other words, not just to spend most of our attention on planning for a best-case scenario and mindlessly sticking to a plan, no matter how much uncertainty, complexity, volatility and ambiguity makes the plan obsolete.

Resilient managers question and challenge our hardwired assumptions that come with the excessive rigidity in thinking by exclusively focusing on the activity of best-case

planning. By thinking beyond the risk horizon comes building up robustness and adaptability to contain and recover from the unexpected if necessary. In essence, the primary job of a resilient project manager is to build up physical but foremost social redundancies that can be activated quickly once the unexpected starts to materialize and to set the scene for one of the key skills in project management: team improvisation.

Q4. Would you please elaborate on “team improvisation”?

Kutsch: Team improvisation encapsulates a process of simultaneous planning and action; we invent and create solutions on our feet, in-realtime. Furthermore, team improvisation requires that we align our real-time planning and action with each other like a jazz band. Jazz soloists improvise new melodies on the spot that fit into the prescribed structure of a theme. In extremely short time spans the soloist makes irreversible decisions regarding the pitch of the note he will play, the expression with which he will play it, and its rhythmic placement. At the same time, each note has an immediate effect on the next. The soloist’s playing is also influenced by his fellow players.

Part III Resilient Projects

Q5. Would you please describe what a resilient project is like?

Kutsch: It is not one that is defined by the term “lean-mean machine”: a project that revolves around the rigid adherence and compliance to a best-case plan, with project members operating in an illusory bubble of certainty and control. Instead, a resilient project is one that does not take success for granted, that is open and at unease about the possibility of failure, and that focuses on building up capacities and capabilities to adapt and to improvise.

Q6. What are the barriers to project resilience? What are the differences between rule-based project resilience and mindfulness-based project resilience?

Kutsch: Rule-based resilience can be best described with an auto-pilot. The autopilot is being fed with the successful management of past problems and issues. If one comes across such a problem again, the autopilot can activate the exact same response quickly and efficiently. However, the autopilot is unable to deal with novel problems and issues as it does not have a prescribed answer ready. This is when situated cognition comes into play: collective mindfulness. Mindless project management attempts to eliminate situated human cognition as a source of error; mindful project management fosters situated human cognition as an answer to the unexpected.

Unfortunately, more and more project management is routinized and automatized. Just front-loading our actions, with the help of an autopilot, is easier and is closer to how we as human beings tend to operate. We prefer a notion of stability, certainty, and control, even if it remains an illusion. Mindful project management acknowledges uncertainty, complexity, volatility and ambiguity and infuses variability, agility and resilience into our thinking and ways of working. It is not unsurprising that many of us reject such an idea, as it is associated with instability, ambiguity, and variability.

Part IV Processes to Engage with the Unexpected

Q7. The book mentioned the art of noticing, interpreting, preparing, containing and recovering. Would you please elaborate on the meaning and importance of these skills?

Kutsch: I would not consider these as skills but as fundamental, cognitive processes that we as project managers have to go through, simultaneously, to engage with the unexpected.

First, we need to pick up warning signals of impending adversity. Then, we have to make sense of all those signals we have noticed. We have to filter out relevant information from white noise. By noticing and interpreting, we establish real-time contextual awareness of how the future might unfold. In light of this foresight, we prepare ourselves to contain, and if necessary, recover from escalating failures.

Q8. You talked about the art of recovering in Chapter 7. So would you please talk about the key enablers for recovering?

Kutsch: There are plenty of enablers for recovering, for example, Tiger Teams, Big Picture Thinking, Devil's Advocate, A Wide Response Repository.

To refer to a key enabler, "Tiger Teams", it is the parachuting in of seasoned, experienced managers to create new options quickly for recovery. Members of a tiger team are usually experts from multiple disciplines and domains, and should be equipped with the following skills:

- Listening and asking questions from multiple perspectives about what is happening and yet not rushing to conclusions despite the pressure to act quickly;
- Imagining worst-case implications, together with the details of complex, potentially dynamically-changing, tasks;
- Suppressing members' egos in terms of 'knowing the answer' yet remaining inquisitive in creating options;
- Willingness to break existing rules and processes, with the ability to think outside of the usual methods of operation;
- Skills to create solutions that work at the technical, process and human levels;
- Ability to maintain a continuously high level of focus and intensity of action;
- Maintaining all this to achieve rapid project recovery while operating within challenging timeframes under the "spotlight" of senior management.

Part V Organizational Resilience

Q10. What steps should an organization take to transform towards organizational resilience?

Kutsch: It is more of a question of what type of resilience we adopt in managing a project. Traditionally, project management is driven by rule-based, mindless resilience,

defined by past informed determinism and best-case reductionism, with a flavour of oversimplified probabilistic risk management. Mindfulness-based resilience does not try to reduce situated human cognition as a source of error but fosters it to manage the unexpected in projects.

As a first step towards mindfulness-based resilience, one has to put faith into the mindful capabilities of project members and develop these first and foremost. Second, practices on planning will have to take a back seat, and skills and capabilities, such as team improvisation, comes to the forefront. Lastly, commonly used tools and techniques in project management have to be scrutinized in their capacity to cultivate a culture of flexibility, agility and robustness.

Q11. As a top expert in the field of risk management, what do you believe is the right attitude towards risks in the VUCA era?

Kutsch: Simple. We cannot fully plan for and design out uncertainty, complexity, ambiguity and volatility. Instead, we can embrace the unexpected and use the natural powers we are given: being mindful.

To read the original interview and to learn more about PMR magazine, visit <http://www.pmreview.com.cn/english/>



About the Interviewer



Spring

Beijing, China



Spring (English name), Bachelor's Degree, graduated from the English Department of Beijing International Studies University (BISU) in China. She is now an English-language journalist and editor working for *Project Management Review* (PMR) Magazine and website. She has interviewed over sixty top experts in the field of project management. Before joining PMR, she once worked as a journalist and editor for other media platforms in China. She has also worked part-time as an English teacher in training centers in Beijing. Beginning in January 2020, Spring also serves as an international correspondent for the *PM World Journal*.

For work contact, she can be reached via email yuyanjuan2005@163.com or LinkedIn <https://www.linkedin.com/in/yanjuanyu-76b280151/>