

An autumnal personal commentary on some questions about individuals' career contributions and legacies¹

By Alan Stretton

Introduction

This is a highly personal commentary, made in the late autumn of a lengthy career, and prompted by the following questions raised by David Pells' editorial in the September 2021 edition of the PM World Journal. One excuse for this somewhat self-indulgent commentary is that it provides some background on my personal perspectives which may help explain the relevance of some of the materials I have discussed in my many articles in this journal over the past ten years. Pells 2021 asks the following questions.

....what will our legacies be? Individually and as a profession? What differences, what contributions will we make over our careers? These seem more important questions as I get older. Do we all need to accomplish great things? Do we need to become successful or famous? Does helping others matter? Does sharing knowledge and wisdom count?

I will comment on each of these questions, but in a somewhat different order.

Aspiring to become successful or famous?

Success and fame are two very different aspirations for a person like me. I am essentially an introvert, and have never had an interest in trying to win the fame-related plaudits of others. Therefore, it simply never occurred to me to aspire to such fame. Indeed, as an introvert, I am more than a little antipathetic to it. (It is true that I have had to present a public face often enough, which I have learned to do reasonably well. However, that hasn't markedly effected my dislike of being in a public spot-light.)

Now, many of my colleagues in various environments over the years have equated their success rather directly with the fame-related plaudits of others. Indeed, this has often appeared to me to be practically the norm. However, my own criteria about what constitutes success owe very little to the opinions of others. I am rather a harsh critic of my own performance, and mainly relate my success to my own "under the radar" criteria. Perhaps I can illustrate one aspect of this with the following anecdote.

Around the time I left Lend Lease, after 26 years with the organisation, the Civil & Civic Design Manager, Ron Alexander, said to me, "Alan, no-one in this organisation knows about all the contributions you have made to it over the years". This was true, as I had worked for five different CEOs along the way. Ron then paused, grinned, and said,

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rather insightfully, “But you know”. That observation captured my disposition on these matters very succinctly.

In summary, many of my more satisfying successes have been “under the radar” activities, as will be further exemplified shortly.

Leaving legacies?

Regarding legacies, individually, we all leave them. The above questions evidently imply planned legacies. As might be surmised from the above, I have never thought in terms of planned legacies in a career context. Of course, I recognise that my many published articles might be seen as a legacy. But they could only be classed as a meaningful legacy if they actually help some future project managers do their job better. So, it is presently unknowable if my articles might really comprise a worthwhile legacy.

Accomplishing great things?

A similar comment applies to the question of accomplishing great things. Only a few individuals are given the combination of gifts, opportunities, and burning desire to accomplish great things. Some may aspire to do so, but few succeed. Personally, I had neither the required attributes, nor the aspiration, to accomplish great things. I have been quite happy to contribute at a much more modest level, as now discussed.

Contributing over our careers?

Contributing what one can during one’s life has been particularly important for me. Indeed, my own life wouldn’t make much sense to me if I did not feel I was contributing something, even in a minor way. For instance, for most of my working life (with just two notable exceptions early on) I consciously elected to work with organisations that, in my view, were themselves contributing something worthwhile to the world at large – rather than with organisations whose primary aim appeared to be only to make money for a few odd shareholders and stakeholders. On a personal note, I still submit articles to this journal, which is one way I can continue to contribute (or try to), even at a relatively advanced age.

Helping others?

We then come to Pells’ more general question on helping others. With the wisdom of hindsight, helping others is what my professional career has been largely about. This has taken various different forms. Many of these were overt, such as developing and introducing a Master of Project Management course at the University of Technology, Sydney, from early 1988. However, as mentioned above, some of the most satisfying ones were done largely “under the radar”, and it is these that I would like to discuss a little further. I start with another anecdote.

One of Civil & Civic’s top project managers, John Chittleborough, dropped by my desk one day, saying, “Hey Alan, I’ve had this great idea”, and began telling me about it. But

he hadn't got far when he hesitated, then stopped, and said, "I've just realised – you've been suggesting I might consider this for a couple of years now, haven't you?" This was true – but this is also the way I handled any new ideas I might have.

As far as I was concerned, my ideas weren't good ideas unless someone picked them up, took ownership of them, and actually did something with them. I had innumerable conversations of this type with very many of our people, from CEOs to tradesmen. Most of the time I would just hint at possibilities, often in rather an indirect way. If they adopted any of my ideas, this was usually transformed into being their own idea – which was fine by me, as this was what being successful in this context usually entailed.

Sharing knowledge?

This is also the approach I have taken with my many articles in this journal, and its predecessor, *PM World Today*. If only one person benefits from something in any of the articles I have written, by doing something positive with it, then that is a success for me.

Helping people in these ways is one form of sharing knowledge. Another under-the-radar variation of this came about because, much to my puzzlement at the time, all sorts of people within Lend Lease would come to me, totally informally, to discuss very wide ranges of professional and personal issues.

Typically, they would describe a situation to me, I would ask questions, and finally respond along the lines of, "What I understand from what you have been telling me is". Quite often, the person would respond with something like. "Gee Alan, thanks for that", and terminate the conversation right then, or after only relatively short subsequent discussions. So, what was going on here?

With hindsight, the position was that people would invariably put their issues to me with a reductionist perspective – trying to solve a problem by looking at its component parts, but not being able to synthesise these into an understanding of the whole. For some reason whose origins I can only guess at, my natural instinctive approach to a problem is to first put it into its wider context, to see if this throws any light on that particular problem in a holistic sense.

That is the perspective I brought to discussing each of the problems brought to me, and which I then tried to convey with my "What I understand from what you are telling me..." responses. I never gave advice – only my ideosyncratic holistic interpretation. This appeared to work surprisingly well, judging by the numbers of people who approached me, and by my "go and talk with Alan" reputation. But, in a sense I can take no credit for it, because this was just one of the things I did, as naturally as breathing.

As some readers may have observed, I have also taken this type of holistic approach with many of my articles on project management and related topics in this journal. This is a different form of knowledge sharing, but, in the context of our still relatively reductionist society, appears to have been a useful, and occasionally insightful, one.

Sharing wisdom?

Finally we come to wisdom. I don't think this is an attribute which can be shared, although I would like to think it could. One of the attributes of a wise person is knowing enough about a topic to have a reasonably good idea of how little one actually knows about it. I believe there are many wise people in project management, but not so many of them are in the younger generation category. This is only to be expected, as I believe it takes considerable time, and a lot of experience, to qualify for entry into the wisdom domain.

Discussion

This commentary is, of course, very personal, and reflects what certainly appears to be a minority type of personality. Whilst I am totally unqualified to discuss personality types, I was drawn to a recent article by Jones 2022, who discussed research by psychologist Todd Kashdan at George Mason University in Virginia. Jones said that Kashdan had identified four "curiosity profiles" from his work, one of which appeared to fit my own very well indeed. He described people with my types of profile as "problem solvers", which applied to 28% of his 3000 survey respondents. I do not know if a similar percentage would apply to such a sampling of people in the project management domain, but perhaps this figure could be seen as very broadly indicative of the proportion of such people with my type of profile, as indicated in this commentary. Although a minority group, this is still quite a substantial minority – which perhaps provides me with another excuse for offering this personal commentary.

Concluding

So, what broader conclusions might be drawn from this very personal article? One is a recognition that having different perspectives should not inhibit anyone from contributing. Indeed, my own experience is that many of the topics I have written about originated from contributions from writers and practitioners who evidently have different "curiosity profiles", and to which I could bring a somewhat different perspective from my own "problem solver" profile. This is a particular form of pluralism which appears to support the following more generalised comment by Fangel 1993 on the broadening of project management.

By accepting the pluralistic character of project management, a platform can be created for the improvement of the profession and for learning from each other's theories and experiences.

This quotation also appears to me to reflect the spirit of what this journal seeks to facilitate – i.e. to provide a venue in which people can learn from the knowledge and experience of others in the project management and allied fields, and to encourage diverse people to contribute to such sharing and learning processes. I am personally very grateful indeed to have had the opportunity to participate in these processes.

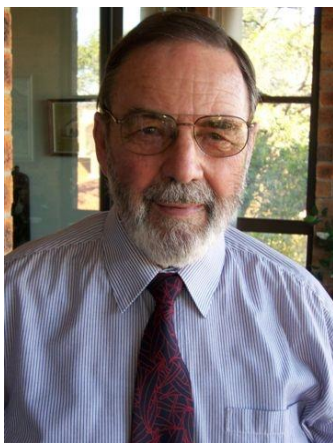
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About the Author



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Alan Stretton is one of the pioneers of modern project management. He is currently a member of the Faculty Corps for the University of Management & Technology (UMT), USA. In 2006 he retired from a position as Adjunct Professor of Project Management in the Faculty of Design, Architecture and Building at the University of Technology, Sydney (UTS), Australia, which he joined in 1988 to develop and deliver a Master of Project Management program. Prior to joining UTS, Mr. Stretton worked in the building and construction industries in Australia, New Zealand and the USA for some 38 years, which included the project management of construction, R&D, introduction of information and control systems, internal management education programs and organizational change projects. He 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

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