

Becoming responsible: Rethinking projects for our modern age¹

Interview with Darren Dalcher²

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Introduction to the interviewee

Darren Dalcher, Ph.D., AKC, HonFAPM, FRSA, FBCS, CITP, FCMI, SMIEEE, SFHEA, MINCOSE is Professor in Strategic Project Management at Lancaster University, and founder and Director of the National Centre for Project Management (NCPM) in the UK. He has been named by the Association for Project Management (APM) as one of the top 10 “movers and shapers” in project management and was voted Project Magazine’s “Academic of the Year” for his contribution in “integrating and weaving academic work with practice”. Following industrial and consultancy experience in managing IT projects, Professor Dalcher gained his PhD in Software Engineering from King's College, University of London.

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

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series *Fundamentals of Project Management*. Heavily involved in a variety of research projects and subjects, Professor Dalcher has built a reputation as a 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 and an Associate of King's College London. He sits on numerous senior research and professional boards, including The BCS Fellows Technical Advisory Group, the PMI Curriculum Committee, The British Standards Institute Technical Committee on Project Management, and the APM Group's Ethics and Standards Governance Board, as well as the British Library's 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. His books, all published by Routledge, include [Leading the Project Revolution: Reframing the Human Dynamics of Successful Projects](#) (December 2018); [Managing Projects in a World of People, Strategy and Change](#) (August 2018); [The Evolution of Project Management Practice: From Programmes and Contracts to Benefits and Change](#) (September 2017); [Further Advances in Project Management: Guided Exploration in Unfamiliar Landscapes](#) (December 2016); and [Advances in Project Management: Narrated Journeys in Uncharted Territory](#) (August 2016). His newest book titled "[Rethinking Project Management for a Dynamic and Digital World](#)" was published by Routledge in 2022.

Prof Dalcher is also an academic advisor for and a frequent contributor to the *PM World Journal*. He can be contacted at d.dalcher@lancaster.ac.uk.

Interview with Professor Darren Dalcher drawing on his book: Rethinking project management for a dynamic and digital world

Q1. In the VUCA era, what kind of project perspective should we take? To deal with VUCA, what skills should project professionals equip themselves with?

Darren Dalcher (Dalcher): We live in interesting times, but one could argue that historically most times have been interesting, challenging and unprecedented. In 1970 Alvin Toffler wrote a best seller *Future Shock*, contending that society was undergoing an enormous structural change which overpowers people. Future shocks can be broadly explained as too much change in too short a period of time. They have persisted ever since the industrial revolution. We seem to clamour for certainty, for knowledge that can be confirmed and secure; yet, reality, especially when we seek to innovate and change,

is far from certain. One of the biggest casualties is the breakdown of systems and ideas that we used to take for granted. There is a lot that we need to learn and unlearn in order to prosper and thrive in a turbulent reality.

The book is therefore positioned around the need to rethink and reimagine some of the ideas applied to projects, innovation and growth. For example, there needs to be a greater emphasis on purpose and intent, rather than on overly prescriptive plans. Moreover, we need to remember that people make projects succeed or fail, and hence we increasingly rely on individuals, stakeholders, communities and society to shape and influence projects. Innovation and experimentation become even more essential when we do not fully understand the territory around us or the overarching conditions under which we operate – in a fast-changing world they are essential to grasping opportunities and responding to emergent conditions as we make sense of them. We also need to refocus on new forms of leadership and empowerment that can support greater achievement through project work.

Q2. Stewardship is about leadership style, right? The *PMBOK Guide* (7th edition) also recognizes “stewardship” as one of the 12 principles of project management. Would you please explain the definition and importance of “stewardship” to readers?

Dalcher: Stewardship is actually a way of life; it is about the act of taking responsibility and caring for something. Stewardship emphasises service and responsibility for things that have been entrusted to us. When I was co-editing the 7th edition of the APM Body of Knowledge back in 2018, we repositioned the notions of the extended life cycle around the concept of stewardship. As we become increasingly more accountable for our products, results and their impacts on our economy, society and the environment, we need to adopt a more responsible and moral stance. Stewardship enables us to take greater responsibility for both actions and impacts. It is encouraging to see that PMI have similarly recognised the importance of stewardship.

Stewardship can therefore provide a viable alternative to leadership and agency. Stewardship takes us beyond self-interest, short term concerns and selfish acts by individuals – It begins by recognising the value of precious resources or prized commodities entrusted to us. It is applied by adopting a long-term perspective, and it is particularly essential in thinking about future generations and the long-term impacts of our actions and undertakings so that we can all discharge our duty to leave the world a better place than when we found it...

Q3. Followership is as important to project success as leadership; do you agree? In your eyes, what are the top qualities of a perfect follower?

Dalcher: Frankly, you are not much of a leader when you have no followers. However, mindless following of toxic or destructive leaders can also be problematic. The truth is that followership needs to be taken more seriously. We spend a lot of time and effort trying to learn, teach and apply great leadership ideas. Early research suggested that perhaps only 20% of the success of our organisations can be traced to their leaders; the rest of the credit is down to followers. And yet, we see hardly any courses focused on good or effective followership.

Contrary to heroic thinking, wisdom does not always come from the top. Good followers therefore need to be fully engaged, forever questioning and scrupulously focused. Empowered followers need to be empowered by their leaders to adopt a courageous stance. In the spirit of stewardship for themselves and their organisations, they need to be able to take responsibility, serve their organization and their purpose, challenge what seems wrong, take moral action and speak truth to power. In the post-pandemic world, there is a need for greater emphasis on the creation of communities where people can concurrently support and share the burden and privilege of stewardship. Perhaps the key skills for leaders and followers alike is the humility needed to constantly seek to learn and improve.

Q4. In the chapter of “Entrepreneurship”, you talk about thinking like an expert entrepreneur. Would you please elaborate on that?

Dalcher: This question follows on quite nicely. Entrepreneurs often act as agents of innovation, change and renewal, creating new development and enhancing well-being. Entrepreneurs create new things with value. Now, in the book, each chapter is positioned as a dialogue in two parts, with an initiation into a new area, followed by some fresh thinking introduced by leading experts that often hail from other domains and disciplines. This gives us a chance to listen, digest and reflect on new ways of acting and doing. In this chapter, there is an early discussion about the loss of the entrepreneurial spirit in how project management is done, and the impacts wrought on practice. The experts are then invited to challenge the profession and help it to rediscover its long forgotten entrepreneurial spirit.

Entrepreneurs seek to expand the problem space and increase returns as they work through emerging opportunities, utilising existing resources; in doing so, they think and work differently. The essence of the chapter is in utilising some of their approaches and ways of thinking to reconfigure what can be achieved through projects by adopting a more creative and effectual methods of working; thereby contributing to creating deeper, more effectual and more meaningful and sustainable success.

Q5. What are your tips on how to put people first in the process of people management?

Dalcher: This is a recurring theme throughout many of the discussions. Conventional wisdom asserts that we need to put our customers first. This makes sense to the extent that the business relies on customers to engage with our products and services in order to realise value. However, turning things around requires starting with our own people, the ones who enable external interaction with customers, and also the ones who can resist change, internally. An employee’s first approach can underpin and enable meaningful change from the inside.

The tips for engendering a new focus require a reflective transformation journey. One of the cases explored in the book emphasises a series of steps, encompassing the engagement in frequent and open conversations; the development of trust through transparency; building an improved structure for change by inverting the organisational power pyramid, so that proposed changes related to where value can be created; and, recasting the role of senior management. A key realization is that power resides away

from the value zone, where the real value can be created and captured. Experimentation offers an essential basis for exploring new transformation opportunities. However, meaningful beneficial change typically occurs away from senior leaders and therefore exploring the extent of new opportunities needs to be initiated where such action can make a difference. As many entrepreneurs have discovered, starting with our employees can actually make us better at dealing with our customers and translate into enhanced relationships, deeper engagement, enhanced experiences, and ultimately lead to improved value utilization.

Q6. What is the significance of trust? How should PMs build, maintain and boost trust in and across teams?

Dalcher: Humans have long understood the value of collaboration. Successful collaboration is underpinned by trust and early work on the dysfunctions of teams identified the absence of trust as a key vulnerability in teams that underperform. Members of successful teams, on the other hand, often exhibit high levels of trust in their co-workers and are comfortable with being vulnerable around colleagues in terms of their own weaknesses, mistakes, fears and concerns. Trust thus plays a significant part in enabling team members to share, support one another and work more effectively. When you are able to trust your colleagues, it becomes possible to engage in more passionate dialogue around critical issues, admit concerns and seek support and help. Team members can start to hold each other accountable without overreliance on team leaders pushing, willing and enabling the team to greater success.

The issue of trust has made a comeback in the form of psychological safety as a feature of effective working places. Psychological safety implies that team members feel safe to take risks and be vulnerable in front of each other. It is not a question of the project manager building, maintaining and boosting trust – it is all about teams building sufficient trust in each other to become high performing; indeed a team becomes one, when people learn to trust one another. Creating the right atmosphere for trust building across the team would often imply that there is a high sense of purpose and meaning, that there is structure and clarity about goals, roles and plans, and that team members believe that their work is meaningful.

Ultimately, the success of the team will hinge on whether there is a feeling of psychological safety and the degree to which team members feel they can depend on each other to make meaningful things happen. A good project manager will therefore be able to secure the conditions needed for their teams to become effective and excel.

Q7. In the new book you talked about “leading brainy teams”. What does that mean?

Dalcher: The idea of leading brainy teams builds on Peter Cook’s concept of brain-based enterprises. Peter talks about the need to harmonise the head, soul and heart of business, thereby recognising a greater role for innovation and creativity. Having progressed beyond the steam-age and the machine-age, there is a need to engage with the intelligent combination of knowledge and wisdom.

Leading brainy teams requires a larger concern for humanity and its role. Effective leadership would therefore be expected to reflect the growing importance of areas such as team chemistry, team diversity and team transparency. Continuing to innovate would require greater insights and gainsharing from the available knowledge and wisdom. True team collaboration and innovation in increasingly demanding times would thus rest on the ability of effective leaders to create the requisite conditions that can support the transparent sharing that is needed to underpin and create world-class products and services

Q8. In the chapter on “Lifecycle”, “thinking beyond project delivery” is mentioned. What does it imply?

Dalcher: This is the essence of a new and more responsible practice of project management. It is easy, or perhaps just easier, to focus on delivery and handover in a project setting. Thinking beyond project delivery indicates that the profession is finally prepared for a step change in how projects are described and positioned.

Ultimately, projects are done for a purpose. Indeed, projects are part of a bigger landscape concerned with enabling change, strategy and value. Rather than focus on a linear form of progression, we need to imagine a hybrid world that offers a wider spectrum of options and positions, where learning and sensemaking are viewed as essential, and consideration of the social elements and benefits, allows the development of richer and more meaningful solutions. Looking beyond delivery implies a greater emphasis on the activities associated with deployment and transition, and an increased consideration of the (intended) use related to delivered projects, the benefits that are enabled and the value that accrues. Looking beyond delivery implies a deeper understanding of our projects, their purpose, and the long-term timeframe for getting there...

Q9. The concept of value is at the core of the *PMBOK Guide* (7th edition). How do you define and measure value?

Dalcher: When we were editing the 7th edition of the APM Body of Knowledge about three years ago, I drew a diagram indicating that project management needs to engender a shift from a culture of delivery towards an ethos of value. This diagram is very significant as it encapsulates the nature of the shift required in project management thinking if we want to remain relevant and create good, useful and sustainable projects.

Value relates to the purpose and rationale for a project. It comes from devising a capability in the form of a product or service that is meaningful to the intended user community. Our projects aim to enable users to utilise the new capability, to facilitate change and to create a new world – that is both usable and useful. The ethos of value is concerned with the purpose and the intended use, as well as the new capability that are all enabled through effective and meaningful project work.

Q10. What is the future of project management like from your perspective? What does the future hold for project professionals?

Dalcher: The future is always exciting, especially when we are ready to embrace change. We are entering an increasingly digitalised and connected world replete with breathtaking new technologies. Conjoining different technologies offers an enormous potential for a fourth, and even a fifth industrial revolution. There is increasing talk about the project society, the projectification of business and working life, and a strong entrepreneurial and innovative flavour that is applied to knowledge production, projects and other endeavours. How do we bring all these elements together? Well, it still comes down to people. The accelerating rate of change demands a greater focus on revisiting culture, values, learning and reflection.

The future of project management demands a more inclusive and responsible profession. We need to think people-first, whilst considering the implications of our actions on society, and more globally on our wider environment and context. Purpose and meaning will continue to play a key part in motivating our actions, colouring our intentions and supporting our cases for improvement. Greater uncertainty, turbulence and ambiguity, would necessitate more exploration, experimentation and enhanced innovation capability. Continuous exploration can become the basis for driving for results, whilst balancing financial, social, environmental and global concerns. The new challenges would hopefully be matched with a deeper recognition of the moral choices and options that we face in becoming responsible stewards for the resources and capabilities entrusted to us.

The future is exciting, but it will be up to us all to determine how responsible, moral and accountable we choose to become. My sincere hope is for greater professionalism that can support improved decisions, choices and tradeoffs and more meaningful solutions to the problems we face. I hope this gives a flavor of the conversations that we ought to be having and an insight into some of the discussions that are included in the newly published book.

For more information regarding Darren:

<https://www.lancaster.ac.uk/lums/people/darren-dalcher>

and the book: <https://www.routledge.com/Rethinking-Project-Management-for-a-Dynamic-and-Digital-World/Dalcher/p/book/9781032133119>