On Alan Stretton's December project success paper
by Hugo Minney, PhD
Letter to the Editor

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LETTER TO THE EDITOR

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Dear Editor,

Alan Stretton rightly argues (in 'QUESTIONING "PROJECT SUCCESS"' Dec 2023) that the success of a project happens outside of the control of the project manager. And herein lies the primary reason why project managers resist benefits management – we are control freaks!

Benefits come about when "those done to" change their processes and behaviours. Whether passive (the new process is the only way available) or active (there are choices), human beings can resist change. Benefits simply won't happen if "those done to" resist too hard.

Does this absolve the project manager from either credit or blame?

The project manager (or project management team) should be rewarded or punished for the part that we have control over. However, it's my opinion that project managers should also take responsibility for the success or otherwise of a project, from the point of view of its value to the organization.

Project leadership has enormous power to create conditions for change. Not just to deliver the physical building or connected ICT, not even to just provide the training and information, but to understand what is important to whom, to make decisions on the capabilities of the solution so that it addresses what's important, to offer motivation so that the change comes about. In other words, the project manager is responsible to influence the realisation of benefits.

Of course, there's resistance. Why do something that you won't be rewarded for? Why accept conditions and reward for something that you don't have control over? Because

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it's right. Because we have more influence than anyone else to bring this about, and because it makes or breaks the success of the organization.

There's a saying "all improvement requires change, but not all changes lead to improvement". The project manager can have a career following orders, perhaps even getting rich from their success bonus. But isn't it better to look back and say "I made a difference" – rather than "I could have made a difference but I couldn't be bothered to do the additional 1%"?

On this basis, I disagree with Dr Stretton. Project success should be defined by the contribution to the organization's success, not by the milestones achieved within tolerance. Project success should be equated with organizational success, not with a Gantt chart and a budget. The Sydney Opera House went over budget and was delivered late, and Boris's Garden Bridge was delivered on time and on budget, only you've never heard of the latter because it was a failure (wobbled too much if 3 people marched in step). The Sydney Opera House would be considered a failure by Stretton's argument (and the architect hid himself away from major public projects), whereas the Garden Bridge would be considered a success even though people couldn't use it.

What's your view?

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