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Governing projects under complexity: theory and practice in project management

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Governing projects under complexity: theory and practice in project management.

Abstract

In this paper we argue that the fledgling field of project and programme governance has the potential to make a major scholarly and practical contribution. One that not only has the potential to mainstream project management within the broader business and management field, but to also cement its place as a dominant voice in the successful governance of the strategic intentions of organizations, societies, and nations. With this argument in mind three themes organize present discussion in this issue of *International Journal of Project Management*: the first concerns how we should make sense of governance, something that is clarified through a review of the current state of play in the literature; the second theme comprises papers that report research conducted on governance in projects, using insights from surveys, case studies and other systematic forms of empirical observation. The third theme focuses on theoretical models of governance, ranging from distributed knowledge management and learning perspectives on project governance to systems engineering approaches. While we do not claim that this issue is exhaustive, we do believe it provides a sign post about the current state of play, and the potential future of governance in project and programme management as a mainstream domain of research, theory and practice.

Governing projects under complexity: theory and practice in project management.

Introduction

The idea of this special issue emerged out of a recently completed Australian Research Council Linkage project aimed at exploring the role of governance on project blow-outs (LP0989839) titled 'Governance Matters: identifying and making sense of the antecedents to project blowouts' (www.arc.gov.au/rtf/LP09Rd1/TSyd_Uni.rtf). Our aim in putting this special issue into process was to encourage researchers to advance project and programme governance as a field of scholarly enquiry, and as a core strategic concern for all those involved in the 'good' governance and successful delivery of projects and programmes. No special issue can be comprehensive but they can act as a signpost of emergent and significant issues. If the special issue contributes to making strategic project and programme governance a central concern for researchers, theorists and practitioners we will have achieved our purpose.

Governing projects under conditions of complexity: projectification, theory and practice in project management.

Over the last decade or so the main project management publications, such as the *International Journal of Project Management* and *Project Management Journal* have published much work contributing to project management as a field of enquiry for scholarly theory and research. At the same time the journals have attempted to balance the focus on theory with a need to contribute to project management practice. The challenge of being not only practically relevant and 'useful' but also scholarly, contributing to theory building and testing, improving knowledge and understanding of project management phenomena

through well designed and executed research, is not unique to the field. It characterizes all management research; however, project management has an additional challenge due the widespread adoption of project modes outside the traditional confines of defence and civil engineering construction projects. Today the field is being challenged to transcend its boundaries and contribute to broader management theory and practice, if only because of the increasing 'projectification' of society (Lundin and Söderholm 1998), and the challenges this entails (Packendorff and Lindgren, 2014). Drouin, Müller and Sankaran (2013) propose that project management researchers can adopt transformational and translational approaches as a response to this challenge for broader relevancy and applicability and do so by borrowing from different fields of research 'such as organizational research, management research, economics, biology, education etc.' (p.25).

Some of the highly cited recent works that have contributed to the field have come from scholars practicing as anthropologists, economic geographers, psychologists and sociologists rather than as project management scholars. Interested in major projects they have brought new insights to the phenomena comprising the projectified society. Within the broad management field a growing interest in project management oriented concerns has provided project management scholars with opportunities for making a significant impact within more mainstream management and business fields. Mainstream journals that have published works germane to the project management discipline include *Financial Times* Top 45 Journals such as *Organization Studies*, whose special issues on 'The Power of Networks and Networks of Power' (Josserand et al, Forthcoming) and 'Temporary Organizing' (Sydow et al Forthcoming) are extremely relevant, as is the special issue of the *Journal of*

Management Studies on 'Public-Private Collaboration, Hybrid Organizational Design and Social Value' (Quélin et al, forthcoming), for instance.

Despite the boundary-spanning opportunities the project management scholarly community still retains many elements of localism. To be fair, there are many reasons for this lack of transcendence, both real and imaginary. One reason may be that unless the words 'project management' appear in the title of a special issue, project management scholars may not be cognisant that there is material of interest there. The journal may be seen as irrelevant or outside one's core interests. A second reason is the typical institutional separation of project management scholars in many universities from the larger community of management and organization scholars. Often they will be attached to engineering, built environment or non-business faculties. Project management scholarship submitted to the major journals in the fields of management and organization studies competes for space with a vast array of scholarship. On many occasions project management work that is submitted will be reviewed by people that may well be versed in theory and research ranging from economic theories of the firm, institutional theory, social theory, social and personality psychology but who may have limited or no practical project experience. This can be both a plus and a minus. On the positive side, the reviewers and the readers of such journals will be looking for broader appeal and relevancies of the works published in advancing theory and the unique empirical focus of the project management community has much to offer in this respect. On the negative side the institutional specificity of much project management work and the relatively patchy knowledge of its practitioners of the broader social literature that informs the best management and organization theory is an undoubted handicap that limits mutual learning.

Mainstream management scholars have rarely engaged with the main project management journals in the same way as they engage with the mainstream management journals.

Journals specialising in project management, despite contributing to issues and phenomena that are the focus of the top tier management journals, struggle to gain legitimacy beyond the limits of their own specialist discipline. Much has to do with the journal rankings' game and the influence of various research excellence framework requirements, various Dean's journal ranking lists, and so on, on field selection and development decisions. As a case in point, project management journals such as the *International Journal of Project Management* and *Project Management Journal* are tier 2 journals in the current ABS rankings in the UK. While the former is ranked as an A-level journal in Australia, the latter is still ranked at level B. Such rankings are both surprising and, perhaps, erroneous, partially because project management journals are seen to be too 'specialised' or 'technical' to warrant a higher ranking among management journals. Another issue is the variable quality of theoretical contributions and the lack of attention to a concern with the philosophical underpinnings of the knowledge produced (Morris, 2013; Biedenbach and Müller, 2011) as well as the limited research methods used and the orientation of conclusions to much more pragmatic and practical relevancies rather than theoretical relevancies or in the framing of future agendas for major research. As such, project management papers rarely achieve citation and notice in the mainstream journals.

The double edged challenge that we have described is real but it is not insurmountable.

There have been some rare but seminal pieces that have been published in top-tier management journals over the years; for example in the growing field of 'mega-projects' and major programmes (see Flyvbjerg, 2014), which offer an opportunity for shaping

management research and theory with real practical implications. Also, despite the lack of incentive to do so (due to promotions criteria, research excellence assessments and so on), some mainstream management scholars from a range of disciplines are choosing to publish in the project management oriented journals, in addition to their usual journal outlets, thus resulting in a kind of reverse osmosis. More importantly, there is evidence that project and programme management as a field is cresting and, to use a surfing metaphor, is a wave gathering momentum. A handful of research leaders ride atop the peak but increasingly more scholars seek to gain propulsion from the wave's momentum

Project and programme management are increasingly a favoured approach in a wider array of fields, led by infrastructure projects in engineering and IT as well as major crises-responses (Sankaran et al. 2014) and business schools are alert to this new phenomenon that transcends many of the traditional borders of the firm or the organization. Phenomena encountered in project management have an enormous potential to contribute to theory as well as to shape management and organization theory positively and generatively (Carlsen and Pitsis, 2008). Sustained impact requires a concerted programme of research and theory, and building a community of scholarship to ensure influential research is broadened, built, and sustained (Sillince et al, 2014). A significant area will be the domain of governance in projects and programmes.

Governance Matters

Increasingly, projects are being used strategically to transform organizational practices and processes, not only to deliver products, services or infrastructure (Bjørkeng et al, 2009). Yet the design, execution, management and close out of contemporary complex projects occurs

in contexts of unparalleled uncertainty, making it difficult to govern these projects in line with intended and anticipated strategic objectives and imperatives. Organizations, and the projects they govern, must deal with challenges posed by uncertainty in ecological, social and economic sustainability; ambiguity arising from advances in the technological means of communications; shifting geopolitical power relations that bring both challenges and opportunities and at the same time the governance of these projects must be able to attract and retain people who are not only skilled and knowledgeable in all technical matters relating to projects but also able to adapt to turbulence in the operating environment.

Transformations in organizational relations due to the complexity and political turmoil of the environments in which the projects are established can induce significant changes in some or all of the mechanisms used to govern projects. A major challenge for leadership is to ensure projects align both with strategic imperatives and changing contexts of action that might redefine these imperatives. Increasingly, calls for leaders to be both more strategic about projects as well as ensuring projects are more strategic (Keller-Johnson, 2014; Meskendahl, 2010), and assume political and thus project significance. The role of projects in managing major issues of risk in times and places of financial, environmental and political instability ensures that it could not be otherwise. Governance mechanisms refer to processes of institutional, market or network organization through legal, normative, discursive or political processes (Bevir, 2013). In its broadest definition good governance can be thought of as how individuals, groups, organizations, societies, nation states are held accountable not only for outcomes but also ethical behaviours (Clegg et al 2011).

Much of the recent governance literature focuses not so much on the governing of states or agencies over organizations but on the governance of organizational relationships

(networks, collaboration and partnerships for example) pertaining to projects. Core to governance are the mechanisms used to govern actions. These include organizational structures, roles and responsibilities of boards and management, control systems, auditing and reporting mechanisms, and lines of communication. Typically these internal governance mechanisms constitute only a part of governance; also critical are external governance mechanisms such as government policies, laws and regulations, financial markets and institutional frameworks, political environments, power in direct and indirect stakeholder relations, and the reporting of all these in various media (Bednar, 2012).

While governance is growing as an area of concern for management and organizational researchers and theorists, very little is known about its role and impact on projects and the management of projects outside of the field of economic development and aid; even then little from a project management perspective; and even less is known about the systemic impact of project governance. That is, how governance and project systems have a reciprocal impact. Moreover, there is still work to be done in defining and operationalising project governance as distinct from other forms of governance (Morris, 1997) and in specifying how projects are distinct from other forms of organizing conceptually and philosophically (Morris, 2013). Nonetheless, within the project literature there have been studies that consider the role of ethics, trust and governance in temporary organizations (Müller et al, 2013), the need for a project governance body to oversee project benefit realization (Hallgrim et al, 2014), and the role of governance of Public-Private Partnership projects and risk bearing capacity in partnership breakdowns (Chang, 2014; Johnston and Gudergan, 2007; Johnston and Gudergan, 2009), and the role of culture on governance of projects (van Marrewijk, et al, 2008). Addressing the tensions, challenges and opportunities

inherent in project governance is a timely, relevant and strategically important area of research with significant implications and applications to practices at all levels: within and between organizations, projects, and people. Furthermore, existing theoretical perspectives offer many opportunities further to explain the tensions, challenges and opportunities inherent in project governance, making it a ripe and vibrant field of research, theory and practice.

Overview of papers

For this issue of the *International Journal of Project Management* we are fortunate to have nine engaging and informative articles on the dynamic role of governance on projects, and how projects impact governance. We have organized these nine articles into three general themes. Theme one, *making sense of governance*, reviews the current state of play in the literature, providing significant insights into how the literature on the governance of projects has been narrated over time. These papers provide the reader with a comprehensive picture of the key dynamics of project governance mechanisms, including how governance can be designed to allow for flexibility and adaptation while also maintaining accountability for project outcomes.

The first theme begins with an article titled 'Multi-level project governance: Trends and opportunities' by Christopher Biesenthal and Ralf Wilden (Biesenthal and Wilden, 2014). In this paper the authors conduct a thorough and systematic investigation of previous research on governance and conduct a content analysis to highlight dominant concepts and themes underlying project governance research literature. They show that agency and stakeholder theories have been applied and extended to projects more than any other theoretical

tradition. In addition, they show that there are differences in how governance is treated in project management journals compared to general management and IT and engineering journals. They conclude with a framework that links governance theories to multiple organizational levels relevant to project governance.

The second paper, 'Organizational enablers for governance and governmentality of projects', by Ralf Müller, Sofia Pemsel, and Jingting Shao (Müller, et al, 2014), identifies and provides insights into organizational enablers for governance. Their main finding is that governance is enabled through different forms of flexibility at different levels of governance, institutional setup and authority at the project level; flexible structures and mind-sets of people at the organizational level, and through development of self-responsible and self-organizing people for governmentality (wilful subjugation) in project settings. Their work opens up several exciting avenues for future research beginning with a basic but critical question for future research: is there a relationship or correlation between governance and project success? (A simple question with wicked implications!)

The third paper in this section is called 'What is project governance and what are its origins?' by Tuomas Ahola, Inkeri Ruuska, Karlos Artto, and Jaakko Kujala (Ahola, et al, 2014). As with the other papers in this section, Ahola and his colleagues seek to provide clarity concerning the ambiguous nature of project governance. The authors examine the project governance literature and compare and contrast it to general governance literature published outside the domain of project research. Their analysis is fascinating and shows the emergence of two distinct and relatively independent streams of research. One of these streams addresses project governance as a phenomenon external to any specific project, while the other views project governance as internal to a specific project. The implications

of the dilemma they raise are that either project governance is unique to the project or that a general form of governance is imposed on projects independent of the project itself. The authors argue that there exists considerable potential for bridging the project governance and general governance literatures further because of this overlap. One question that emerged out of this paper is can there be an operationalization of governance specific to projects or are more general models sufficient? Are we doing nothing more than putting new labels on old wine bottles, as the saying goes? This is a critical question that needs to be answered as we move forward.

The second theme is comprised of empirically driven or inspired papers in which the authors conducted *research on governance in projects*, developing insights from surveys, case studies, and observations. The first paper is 'Governance performance in complex environment: The case of a major transformation in a university hospital' by Monique Aubry, Marie-Claire Richer and Mélanie Lavoie-Tremblay (Aubry, et al., 2014). Aubry and her colleagues explore the tensions between hierarchy and new forms of organizing with competing values of hierarchy and control versus flatter collaborative governance arrangements. Using the competing values framework as a lens for exploring these tensions, they conducted participatory action research in a university hospital where a major organisational transformation was taking place. Their paper tells the story of how competing values exist and evolve over time in the form of paradoxes between executives and the PMO regarding PMO performance. The fruitful idea of paradoxes is used to understand the dynamic processes related to performance evaluation within a transformation project. Paradox and governance are considered in relation to the tensions of competing values and the interpretation of project performance.

In 'Operationalizing governance categories of projects' by Ralf Müller and Laurence Leconte (Müller and Leconte, 2014) existing conceptualizations for the categorization of governance for projects based on the overlay of the shareholder–stakeholder orientation with the behavior–outcome control of a project's parent organization are deployed. Their measures derive from the intersection of governance and organization theory with project management theory. The application of the measurement construct, its validity and reliability are tested, drawing on survey data from 478 members of the Project Management Institute and the International Project Management Association. Their results show the differences in governance structures for projects by country, project size, and project type. These insights provide managers with a better understanding for developing governance structures. Importantly Müller and Leconte also provide a guide for academics to further explore and develop governance theories.

The final empirically themed paper is 'The Transformative Effect of Top Management Governance Choices on Project Team Identity and Relationship with the Organization – An Agency and Stewardship Approach' by Aurélie Toivonen and Petri U Toivonen (Toivonen and Toivonen, 2014). Their study focuses on the relationship and identity changes within and between a project team following top management intervention in the context of a large international construction project. The study follows the fledgling project-as-practice tradition, examining the actions and behaviors of the project team through participant ethnography in the "praxis" (theory espoused and theory in use) of the project site over its entire duration. The longitudinal case allows the examination of the way the transition process established a new governance culture undermining an initial trust-base, changing a situation characterized by a virtual absence of mechanisms towards one that featured far

more potent mechanisms of control, monitoring, and punishment. Simultaneously, the initial stewardship relationships and collectivist identity of the project team shifted towards agency relationships and individualistic identity. The triggers for the transformation process were identified as CEO succession, project failure, top management intervention driven changes in governance mechanisms, as well as a project team perception of their organizational betrayal.

The final three papers provide insights into *models of governance* and are informed by approaches ranging from distributed knowledge management and learning perspectives on project governance (Ahern, Leavy and Byrne, 2014), a practical framework for project governance (Too and Weaver, 2014), to a systems engineering approach to project governance (Locatelli, Mancini and Romano, 2014). The first paper in this final theme is aptly titled 'Complex project management as complex problem solving: A distributed knowledge management perspective' by Terence Ahern, Brian Leavy, and P.J. Byrne (Ahern, et al., 2014). Ahern and his colleagues argue that traditional project management privileges planning and downplays the role of learning. Using two exemplar organizations as vignettes, their paper shows the importance of developing complex PM expertise as a form of complex problem solving. They point out that central to complex project management as a form of complex problem solving is the governance challenge of knowledge management under uncertainty. In response they analyze a distributed coordination mechanism that evolved in their exemplar organisations; in particular, they emphasize the 'common will of mutual interest', a self-organising process fostered around project goals and closely aligned to the project life cycle.

The penultimate paper is 'The management of project management: A conceptual framework for project governance' by Eric G. Too and Patrick Weaver (Too and Weaver, 2014). Where the first three papers of this special issue synthesized existing literature to develop an understanding about the extent to which project management studies of governance draw on commonly studied theories of governance, Too and Weaver orient their paper explicitly towards the practitioner. Their paper offers advice on four key elements to improve the performance of projects and hence create value for organizations. The authors emphasize the crucial need to focus strategically on selecting the right projects and programs to support the organization's strategy, while terminating those that no longer contribute to the business success of the organization; the need to ensure explicit and direct links between the executive and the project or program manager for the whole project lifecycle; ensuring oversight and strategic reporting capabilities. Sufficient project and program management support are the measures of an effective governance system. Their framework provides practical guidance to organizational leaders in the development of effective project governance to optimize the management of projects.

The final paper to close this special issue is titled 'Systems Engineering to improve the governance in complex project environments' by Giorgio Locatelli, Mauro Mancini and Erika Romano (Locatelli, et al., 2014). Locatelli and his colleagues argue that systems engineering can provide a sound framework for addressing blowouts in projects. Systems engineering, they argue, is the emerging paradigm in complex project environments that is designed to transform governance from "project" to "system based" and thereby increase the chance of holistic success. Systems engineering is a multidisciplinary approach to enable the successful delivery of systems in complex environments through a comprehensive set of approaches,

techniques and tools. Locatelli and his colleagues focus their discussion on how this systems engineering can transform governance from “project governance” to “system governance”, improving the performance of projects delivered in a complex environment. Their paper provides significant food for thought about governing in a way that is system wide rather than micro in its strategic intent and scope.

In conclusion

While we have framed the purpose of this special issue and also summed up what we felt were the fundamental elements of each of the papers featured in this issue of the *International Journal of Project Management*, we would not want to limit the readers’ interpretations of each of the papers or the sense made of the topic of project and programme governance specifically and of governance more generally. By reading each of the papers found in this issue there are ample opportunities to explore project governance further. Our introduction merely functions as an invitation to you to make such exploration, offering a few cues for doing so.

Much needs to be done in this field, but it is clear to us that project and programme management is an important strategic issue, a central concept to strategic management, leadership and organization studies. Moreover, the strategic complexity of project and programme governance must be seen as a direct concern of all of those involved in organizing and not simply the domain of project managers. Strategic projects and programmes must be central to the strategic direction of organizations, or else they are anything but strategic. In the scholarly community, we in the future would hope to see a range of activities occurring that would be a strong indicator that project and programme

governance is a mature and well developed area of study. So what would the future look like? We would hope to see an active community writing on, theorising about and researching the dynamics of project and programme governance. To do so will require defining, conceptualizing and operationalizing the core ideas in project and programme governance. What it is and what it is not; what are its core elements and its dynamics, and how, if at all, is it different to any other form of governance? We would expect to see dedicated courses, modules, subjects and programmes on the topic area being taught in business schools as part of mainstream management offerings, and academic titles such as 'Professor of Project and Programme Governance'; we would expect to see dedicated workshops, conference streams, and event conferences on the topic; we would see a vibrant programme of research studying project and programme governance, dedicated research centres which also advise on business and government policy in the area; there would be meaningful knowledge exchange and interactions between scholars, governance, business and society; and importantly we would find members of our community not just publishing in the mainstream, leading journals, but being cited and referenced in not only academic journals, but also in driving policy making rather than being driven by it as has tended to happen to project management as a profession (see Paton, Hodgson and Muzio, 2013). Time will tell if such a vision transpires but we certainly hope so.

If you are a visitor to the field we hope you are drawn into its complexity, challenges and opportunities and that you will add to research, theory and practice in project and programme governance and the governance of projects and programmes. If you are a seasoned and experienced practitioner, we hope that this special issue will spark or stoke enthusiasm to continue exploring this dynamic domain of theoretical enquiry and complex

practice. In the end, we hope that the special issue not only answers some questions but that it also has generated new puzzles to further inspire and sustain a vibrant, multidisciplinary, international community of scholars, practitioners and students interested in project management, drawn from both inside and outside the field. More generally we expect to see a vibrant, dynamic, and collegial community of scholars emerging, who will transcend disciplinary boundaries and act as leaders in advancing understanding and knowledge about governance in complex project and program contexts.

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