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Projects and Paradoxes

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This article focuses on some of the issues of bringing the business of projects and operations closer together, using processes already owned and driven by the organisation. It addresses the paradoxes that upper management and project managers face in the management of projects that lead us to a number of best-practice rules that can generally be applied to a wide spectrum of projects.

Project Paradoxes

Dennis Comninos and Enzo Frigenti have spent the past 25 years lecturing, training, consulting, and mentoring in the field of project management. During this time, they have observed thousands of managers involved in developing and implementing projects. These observations revealed a pattern of management contradictions experienced in the delivery of projects.

On closer analysis, they discovered that these management tensions were largely similar across different industries, yet they varied in the extent of the challenges they posed to the organisation. In established project industries, such as engineering, the contradictions created fewer problems, while in the newer project areas, such as business, they posed considerable obstacles. Rather than regarding the contradictions or tensions as dilemmas, viewing them as a set of paradoxes reveals some insights into project management and highlights best practice principles useful in the business of projects.

What are paradoxes?

The way of paradoxes is the way of truth.

Oscar Wilde (1854–1900), playwright, toast of London, convict

The Collins English Dictionary and Thesaurus (1998) defines a paradox as a "seemingly self-contradictory statement that is or may be true".

Religious tenets have often been expressed as paradoxes. They encourage people to reflect deeply on seeming contradictions and, in doing so, to reach deeper understanding and meaning. The same principles can be applied to project management. Two opposite tensions, thesis and antithesis, will develop a synthesis. What must be understood is that the synthesis is not merely a compromise of the two extremes but could be a novel solution.

In his book *The Age of Paradox* (1995, Harvard Business School Press), Charles Handy states that business paradoxes will increase both in number and kind. When faced with a paradox, Handy's advice to managers is that they "can, and should, reduce the starkness of some of the contradictions, minimise the inconsistencies, understand the puzzles in the paradox, but [they] cannot make them disappear completely, or escape them".

Paradoxes in the project context

Project paradoxes appear to have the same characteristics as those stated by Handy. The starkness of the paradox can be reduced through an improved understanding of project processes and the business context in which they operate. In an environment of uncertainty, the paradoxes bring some focus and balance to opposites and create a platform of better understanding for the wise project manager to build on.

The challenge is to manage the paradoxes and not to avoid them in the early stages. If the paradoxes are viewed as too difficult and therefore not addressed, the project will move down a path that is not sound. Later, the project team will have to deal with the consequences of this avoidance, and often it is too difficult or expensive to change course. The difference between a competent project manager and a novice is the deeper understanding of these management tensions.

Delivering project change in the fluid, fast moving business environment requires some form of stability, which leads us to the first paradox.

Paradox 1: Project change requires stability

In the absence of essential elements of stability, change will result in confusion and turmoil on the project. Project sponsors and managers need "islands of stability" to guide teams and to ensure the integration of project deliverables into the organisation. Without this stability, project results will not align with organisation strategy and stakeholder expectations. Project participants and stakeholders will have difficulty comprehending the project's contribution to the organisation's vision, resulting in unproductive activity and high levels of frustration and demotivation.

Typical elements of stability are:

- a sustainable organisation vision, mission, critical success factors (CSFs), goals, and objectives
- a recognised organisation culture
- a project mission, CSFs, and objectives that are aligned with organisation strategy
- a clear understanding of what the organisation will change to as a result of the project
- a well-developed change strategy that maps the transition from the current state to the future state, clear communication on what will not change and how the project will contribute to this.

The first point above, and largely the second, is usually present in the organisation and automatically flows into the project core team's attitude and understanding. The remaining points are the responsibility of the sponsor and core team to develop, communicate, and facilitate. These islands of stability will assist the project as it navigates through uncharted and often treacherous waters. They form the basis of project strategy or general approach, ensuring that planning is objective or result directed.

Business Focused Project Management (BFPM™) recognises that business projects grow from fuzzy to clear through progressive elaboration, leading us to the second paradox.

Paradox 2: Clarity is achieved by embracing fuzziness

BFPM™ is different from the classic project management approach taken in construction/engineering projects, which have a relatively high degree of certainty at early stages. In business projects, team members often find themselves moving around in fog, searching for guiding beacons to point them in the right direction. As the team reaches each consecutive beacon, the fog progressively lifts, revealing more light. The project team needs to accept this fuzziness as a normal state in the project process.

The project team's recognition of the fuzzy to clear concept is essential for building a stable project, but to ensure project results the executive, upper and functional management must also understand and support the concept. A cultural change will be required to shift from the rigid approach of fixing time, cost, and performance at early stages, to one where the project team is encouraged to develop the project from fuzzy to clear.

A fuzzy to clear approach requires:

- progressive elaboration on what business results the project will deliver
- project sponsor and upper management understanding and support
- an organisation planning process that is guided by strategy and sets the business direction for the required changes
- supporting and protecting the project team from the pressure of delivering something that is perceived to be correct rather than taking the time to elaborate the project
- a fine balance between the extent of research and planning and implementing the project.

The fuzzy to clear concept does not imply that project scope is allowed to change freely with no limitations; rather it is reviewed and improved at important points along the project life cycle. This approach also requires business case benefits and costs to be reviewed at the same points, with "go/no-go" decisions rigorously applied at the important points along the project life cycle.

Another characteristic of construction/engineering projects that distinguishes them from business projects is that the major outputs or deliverables are tangible. In cross-functional business projects, the outputs are often intangible and dependent on the experiences and perceptions of stakeholders. Such projects include restructuring an organisation, customer service improvement programmes, management development training, and business process improvements. In these projects, changes are sought in people's actions, organisation culture, and stakeholder perceptions.

BFPM™ enables us to build our project management plans around owner-defined business requirements, which are measurable in terms of business results. The focus is on aligning the project results with the organisation strategies, rather than on project management processes, which leads us to the third paradox.

Paradox 3: Business results are the measures of project success

This third paradox directs us to where our focus should be. Project success must be perceived and measured in terms of business results (effectiveness), supported by the project process (efficiency). An efficient process is necessary but alone is insufficient to ensure success. Karl von Clausewitz, in *On War 8*, offers much food for thought. His theory of war is just as applicable today as it was 150 years ago. It states: "The key to success is correctly identifying those few crucial, limited areas on which outcome depends. And then concentrate overwhelming, superior force at those decisive points whilst being defensively protected elsewhere."

It is a known fact in business that most attention is paid to the things that get measured. The same is true for projects. Therefore, a project must align with organisation strategy, identify its own strategies, develop critical success factors (the things that must go right), undertake risk analyses and establish performance measures that are results-focused. It is then the role of upper management to focus efforts on those crucial areas of success.

From then on, monitoring, measuring, and taking corrective action are needed to ensure that the critical areas are achieved, and project results delivered. Project measures that merely evaluate project management efficiency and not business results, will misdirect upper management, the sponsor, the project core team, and stakeholders.

When organisations have many cross-functional initiatives, functional staff may work on several projects as well as undertaking departmental work. In addition to facing extra stress, staff often perceive their career promotion opportunities and personal growth to be in jeopardy. This environment is not conducive to team work as individual loyalties lie with their functional department. Project work is strongly reliant on teams, yet it is the individual member that makes the difference. BFPM™ recognises the fourth paradox.

Paradox 4: Build teams by focusing on the individual

In order to build teams, individual motivation needs to be understood and nurtured. Nicholas describes project work as stimulating, satisfying, and providing a sense of achievement. The project mission, objectives, and critical success factors are achievement motivators, while project participation encourages decision-making that enhances participative ownership.

Tools and techniques such as the Deliverables Breakdown Structure, Milestone Objective Chart, Milestone Responsibility Matrix, critical success factors, risk analysis, and contract development can also be motivators if team members are closely involved with their development. When these motivators are combined and personal rewards are in line with personal and career aspirations, the result is a set of powerful personal motivators.

The constant pressure of achieving project products and results is highly motivating to many people. This, combined with participation in decision-making, helps to avoid the stress and conflict that will exist in a non-participative environment or one that exerts excessive pressure. Peter Viall (in *Managing Business and Engineering Projects*, Nicholas studied a large number of teams that "perform at levels of excellence far beyond those of comparable systems". The consistent factor was that these teams knew what they had to do and were committed to doing it. Team members must be clear why the team exists and what their roles are.)

Viall identified time, feeling, and focus as the three characteristics always present in the behaviour and attitudes of leaders and members of high-performing teams. He encouraged would-be leaders to "Seek constantly to do what is right and what is needed in the system (focus). Do it in terms of your energy (time). Put your whole psyche into it (feeling)".

In successful teams, the leaders and members devote a large amount of their energy and time to the task, with full commitment for the duration of the initiative. They feel strongly about the achievement of the objectives and their purpose. They openly defend the project and the benefits it will deliver. They focus on critical areas, important issues, and have a clear list of priorities.

BFPM™ recognises that the goals of individuals and those of the organisation must be in reasonable harmony if project results and personal growth are both to be achieved. Upper management, project sponsors, and managers need to be sensitive to team member aspirations and their motivational needs in terms of rewards and growth.

Although projects are achieved by vigorous horizontal management, minimising the vertical role has serious consequences on project performance. This challenge is introduced in the fifth paradox.

Paradox 5: Integrate horizontally with a vertical focus

BFPM™ assists us in managing cross-functional projects in organisations that deliver services and create products. Irrespective of the roles project managers and functional managers play in a project, there are always horizontal and vertical interfaces. BFPM™ clearly recognises the need to include in the project process functional managers who will be either directly responsible for performing project work, or responsible for providing resources to be directed by project managers. Functional managers are the custodians of resources in their areas; however, they may also be responsible for delivering part of the project work.

When functional managers perceive that the project manager is cutting them off from the project through lack of communication, not seeking subject matter expert advice, or by taking decisions that rightfully belong in functional areas, they will withdraw support for the project. Regaining their trust and support thereafter can be a difficult and time-consuming undertaking. For project managers this is an experience to avoid, as it can considerably diminish the chances of project success.

The challenge to upper management is to find a structure that meets the needs of the project as well as those of the functional departments. Structure has an important influence on culture and behaviour, accountability, authorities, roles and responsibilities, functional boundaries, policies,

and procedures. From a project management perspective, the interface between the temporary project structure and the permanent organisation structure, and more specifically with the functional managers, is of utmost importance.

Uniqueness is as an important characteristic of projects. The unique factors of a project are often new or unknown to the organisation. Unless the unknown is explored and understood, the project core team will not be able to plan and deliver the project with certainty. This introduces the sixth paradox.

Paradox 6: Focus on the unknown to achieve certainty

The most distinct difference between projects and operations is the unknown and therefore uncertain aspects of projects versus the familiarity and repetitiveness of operations. In the experience of the authors, which is validated by post-implementation audits, poor project performance is directly linked to the inability of the project leader to identify and manage uncertainty.

Focusing on uncertainty requires a continual search for "what is different", "what has not been done before that can harm the project", and "unique factors that need addressing through a proactive risk approach".

The challenge is to seek out carefully what is new or different in terms of people, products, and processes. These will form natural risk areas requiring concentrated management and continual evaluation during project execution.

Managing and integrating uncertainty or risk is one of the fundamental competencies of project leaders and team members. Focusing on those areas of uncertainty aids in the achievement of certainty.

Managing these paradoxes is not easy, yet they are crucial to successful project outcomes. Flexible yet focused project management is essential to effectively manage the changes required to lead organisations into the new millennium.

And the trouble is, if you don't risk anything, you risk even more.

Erica Jong (1942 -), writer

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