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Facilitating the Development of Project Managers as Reflective and Creative Practitioners

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ABSTRACT

The need for a major re-think of our approach to project management education has begun to emerge. This re-think is being driven by the growing dominance of project management as the model of delivery in many private and public sector organisation across a wide range of requirements and its limited success in achieving all objectives.

Sustained development of project managers is here considered to depend on adopting a radical approach to their education which focuses on encouraging their development as competent reflective and creative professionals.

The initial indication is that the profession is still too concerned with the day to day application of standard frameworks and methodologies to be able to reflect and learn in the sort of dynamic, immediate ways which will produce a breakthrough.

Keywords: Project Management, Education, Reflective Practice

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1.0 INTRODUCTION

Project Management [PM] as a recognised discipline has been around for a few decades in its present form [Newton, 2005]. However, there have been a number of challenges to its efficacy. These include; the disappointing performance of some project managers [Tampoe and Thurloway, 1993] and the failure of the philosophical framework that guides project management to respond to highly dynamic and complex projects [Jaafari, 2003]. There is a generally accepted view that learning is a key strategic variable for project management success [Ayas, 1996] but limited studies have been conducted on learning [Sense, 2007] and there is little research into the more specific concept of reflection in project management practice. This is despite the widening literature on project management techniques, education and application. To address the emergence of possible shortcomings, scholars such as Packendorff [1995], Smith and Winter [2004; 2005], Winter et al [2006a; 2006b] are challenging current thinking on project management practice, and in the process recommending that projects should be re-conceived in a way that enhances the reconstruction of project managers from *trained technicians to reflective practitioners*.

Despite opportunities being available for project managers to engage in significant personal learning and reflection, a review of papers published in the International Journal of Project Management and the Project Management Journal over the last seven years suggests that, while there appears to be a clearly defined training and education agenda and a maturing learning agenda there is very little evidence of reflective practice apart from studies conducted by Jaafari [2003], Gustafsson and Wikstrom [2004] and Hellstrom and Wikstrom [2005].

Further evidence of the lack of an agenda to examine reflective practice in project management is demonstrated by the fact that although the APM [APM, 2006] discusses 52 areas of knowledge such as people and the profession, leadership and behavioural characteristics of successful project managers in its Book of Knowledge [BoK], no reference was made to reflective practice, although it does discuss the need for project managers to provide and receive feedback as a means of continual improvement.

Two objectives have been identified in this paper. The first objective is to establish the competencies of a reflective practising project manager. Once this is achieved, the paper will attempt to establish the knowledge development of a reflective practising project manager in an educational context. This paper is an attempt to engage in this rethinking process.

2.0 THINKING ABOUT PROJECTS AND PROJECT MANAGEMENT

Business needs change and in order to support these changes, projects are conceived. For this reason, organisations that are seeking to maximise output are expected to continue to initiate and implement requirements that are difficult and expensive. This is because such projects are innovative and radical in approach. To deliver these innovative and radical projects, most organisations have adopted project based management techniques [Martinsuo et al, 2006]. Unfortunately the need to develop and deliver such innovative projects will be seriously limited by the fact that organizations are facing a shortage of *effective* project managers [Cooper and Burke, 2002], who can understand, learn, interpret and deliver customer and stakeholder requirements within a constantly evolving project environment. As a result of these anticipated shortages, Winter et al [2006a], calls for a new direction in research to be explored. This new research direction will involve a complete re-think of how practitioners learn by using relevant theory that is emerging from research. To support this re-think, there is a need to initiate a transformation of project management practitioners from *trained technicians to reflective and creative practitioners*, who can learn, innovate, operate and adapt effectively in complex project environments, through experience, intuition and the pragmatic application of theory in practice.

In this paper, projects are regarded as a temporary and ambiguous articulation of needs which can be measured. This measurement however separates performance and progress while taking into consideration timeline perceptions of measurement criteria.

Project Management can be seen as a discipline, profession or conceptual state. As a discipline, it was developed in the 1950's from several different fields including construction, mechanical engineering and military engineering. With a well developed discipline and professional expertise [Cooke-Davies and Arzymanow, 2003; Kolltveit et al, 2007; Newton, 2005], it is also supported with numerous clearly articulated methodologies.

The impact of project management discourse has been substantial, especially as relates to its practice. Today, as a demonstration of its success and popularity, project management is used globally by multibillion-pound corporations, governments, and smaller organizations. Primarily, it is used as a means of ensuring control in order to deliver on customers or stockholder's requirements.

To support its global implementation, numerous approaches and methodologies championed by professional bodies such as the Association for Project Management [APM], the Project Management Institute [PMI] and the Office of Government Commerce [OGC], have been developed to help manage all stages of the project life cycle.

3.0 SOME DIFFICULTIES

It is important to highlight that there have been some difficulties with defining project management. Some of these difficulties according to Kolltveit et al [2007] have been as a direct result of the lack of a precise and generally accepted definition of what a project is about. With this level of vagueness, it is difficult to bring about any adjustment of current perceptions to the role of a project manager. Such adjustments are however required in order to support the transformation of project managers to become reflective and creative practitioners.

The need for a reconstruction of the project management concept cannot be over-emphasised. There are various reasons for this. Some of these reasons include the impacts of technology, globalisation and the emergence of the knowledge based organisation. Other reasons include that of the need for project managers to ensure that the customers experience is not hampered by any transformation of the project manager's role. All these changes have also had major impacts on the role of the project manager.

4.0 AN ORGANISATIONAL RESOURCE

An organization's competitive success is mainly driven and achieved through people, making their skills and performance critical to business and organisations [Pfeffer, 1994; APM, 2006].

Project managers occupy a central role in the structure and scope of organizational work. By doing so, they are able to develop and implement successfully a specific and unique application content which is referred to as a project. As part of this process, they also become quasi-executives with high responsibility and accountability, but minimum authority [Henderson, 2004]. This role involves the project manager taking the lead in enabling changes involved in delivering organisational strategic requirements. As a result, their role can be seen to be of strategic importance for the organisation. This means that demand for their skills extends beyond the requirement to implement basic controls for a set of requirements, to a requirement to maintain the mutual interaction of various stakeholders.

Criteria	The Trained Technician	The 21st Century Practitioner
Attitudes and Initiative	Follows rules and prescriptions	Informed by principles and frameworks
Knowledge	Sees knowledge as graspable and permanent	Sees knowledge as temporary and dynamic
Approach to Practice	Prescriptive approach to practice	Pragmatic approach to practice
Perception and Outlook	Embraces the known	Embraces uncertainty
Ability	Technical expertise is all	Professional judgement counts
Approach	Emphasises assessment and accreditation	Emphasises reflection and deliberation
Professional Development	Technical training	Professional development

Table 1.0, Characteristics, Traits and Practices relevant to 21st Century Project Managers

The Table 1.0 [above] is adapted from the Major Projects Association [2006]. It highlights some of the characteristics, traits and practices relevant to 21st Century project management practitioners.

To further support the ability of project managers to conduct their role, a reflective approach will enable the project manager to gain a level of interpersonal understanding that enables the creation of a compelling vision for the customer's requirement. This is usually achieved by demonstrating depth and creativity of thought and also by applying intuition and other attributes such as feelings and instinct.

To be successful, project managers are also expected to exhibit characteristics that are closely aligned to the dynamism of their ever changing business world. Such characteristics include generic skills such as effective leadership [APM, 2006], innovation and a proper understanding of business objectives and behavioural characteristics [APM, 2006]. Other skills include an ability to demonstrate depth and creativity of thought, an ability to galvanise action and a sense of urgency while meeting commitments, driving through initiatives and also an ability to create a compelling vision for the sponsoring organisation. In order to achieve these objectives, Hutcheson [1984], expects project managers to be multidisciplinary in outlook. Project Manager's are also expected to consider their projects as a totality while being responsive to the political, physical, economic and other aspects within the environment.

5.0 THEORITICAL PERCEPTIONS OF REFLECTION

The traditional view of project management in organisations has been based on one key perception that all projects are similar. This has led to an assumption that a generic model of project management exists. As a result, methodologies such as RIM [Rapid Implementation Management], PRINCE2 [Projects in Controlled Environments], MSP [Managing Successful Programmes], the APM-BoK [Association for Project Management's Body of Knowledge] and the BSI-BS6079 [British Standard Institute's Guide to Project Management] have all been specifically developed and prescribed in generic forms. As we are however aware, contemporary approaches and views of projects discussed in recent work by Hodgson [2002], Koskela and Howell [2002], Newton [2005], Winter et al [2006b], Cicmil et al [2006] and Dvir et al [2006], all demonstrate that such a traditional view of projects is not necessarily correct and sustainable.

Reflection has been discussed for centuries by philosophers, educationalists, practitioners and researchers [Schon, 1983; Campbell et al, 2000; Sherin et al, 2004]. Although of a limited nature, its specific application in a project management practice has been discussed by scholars such as Jaafari [2003], who in his study of the response of four contemporary models of project management, found that a creative- reflective model was best suited to complex projects being commissioned in an environment of high uncertainty and chaos, primarily because the model relies on competency and self-empowerment of project professionals.

Generally speaking, it is geared towards finding solutions to problems by in-depth and creative thought. It is also about an attempt to improve the future by engaging in a review of past actions. These activities include acts of meditation, contemplation, consideration, exploration and mirroring [Gustafsson and Fagerberg, 2004]. It also involves, perhaps more importantly, conscious rationalisation and reconsideration of previous behaviour. The process is expected to create a meaningful picture of one's experience of the world [Ekebergh et al, 2004], and for this reason has become very popular in the nursing profession [Glaze, 2001; Taylor, 2000].

There is no doubt that the traditional view of the project management professional is no longer adequate. This is based on two major factors. One which has been discussed is because of the lack of a precise and generally accepted definition of what a project actually is. The second problem is that the application of the theory of reflection has rarely figured in discussions on the profession of project management.

6.0 REFLECTION, LIMITING FACTORS

Unfortunately, although the intention of this paper was to demonstrate a need to progress the concept of reflective practice in project management, it has not been possible to demonstrate substantial evidence that reconstructing project managers into this new role will be an easy challenge to overcome. There are a few reasons why this might be the case.

In the first place, there is a lack of an underlying theory in project management [Koskela and Howell, 2002; Turner, 2006a; 2006b]. This situation questions how generic processes can be applied to projects, especially projects that drive business change.

Secondly, because project management has such a large knowledge base, it cannot rely on research-guided models to address or define practice-based application. The expectation however is that the project manager will be prepared to embrace new ideas from sometimes unlikely sources. In effect, engaging in what Williamson [2001] refers to be the re-framing of practitioner perceptions.

The third problem is that projects have traditionally been goal oriented, while emphasis in the profession was placed more on technical competency, experience and the appropriate use of methodology. This situation has resulted in project managers being more focused on agreed models and methodologies of best practice and professional competency which support consistency rather than reflection.

The fourth and final problem is the perception that reflection has ended up being regarded as too academic and inapplicable in project management. We are however aware that on the other hand, it has proved very successful and popular within the nursing profession, which arguably operates in a more high pressure environment.

7.0 CONCLUSIONS

One of the questions which probably will be on the mind of most project management practitioners is whether reflection can result in project managers becoming prisoners of their own experience. This concept, i.e. of the limitation in the use of past experience was explored substantially by Neustadt and May [1988], who argue that the dynamics of history leads people to model decisions based on the perceived relevant or recent experience. In effect, lessons from past experience and history are applied to current situations, one situation too late. In order to manage the possible limitation of such past experience, Artson [2001] suggest a radical openness to the present which is based on viewing our experiences afresh at each moment.

Perhaps it might be the case that the project management's community attitude to reflective practice will depend on the emphasis and assumptions that are taken into consideration when re-constructing the profession. However, at the moment it is perhaps safe to suggest that the profession has been unable to move beyond identifying limitations in approach which suggest that such a reconstruction is desired. Without such a reconstruction of the profession, it is doubtful whether applying outcomes of a process towards creating a compelling vision of for the customer's requirement can be initiated.

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