

## **The Case for Further Advances in Project Management**

Darren Dalcher, PhD

This article looks at some of the key issues and trends that emerge from the book [\*Further advances in Project Management\*](#) published by Routledge.

'Normal' project management discourse is increasingly challenged to accommodate concerns around successful delivery, value realisation, resilience and making change stick. This book attempts to define and refine the boundaries of project management through a series of articles exploring a range of new perspectives and conversations that extend beyond the traditional remit of project management.

The volume brings together leading authorities on topics that are relevant to the management, leadership, governance and delivery of projects. Topics include people, communication, ethics, change management, value realisation, benefits, complexity, decision making, project requirements, project assurance, communication, knowledge management, big data, project requirements, business architecture, stakeholder engagement, strategy, users, systems thinking and resilience.

The main aims of the collection are to reflect on the state of practice within the discipline; to propose new extensions and additions to good practice; to offer new insights and perspectives; to distil new knowledge; and, to provide a way of sampling a range of the most promising ideas, perspectives and styles of writing from some of the leading thinkers and practitioners in the discipline

### **Let management methods evolve**

In 2007 leading US business thinker and strategist, Professor Gary Hamel published his book, *The Future of Management* making a powerful case for bold management innovation. He argued that while technology has changed how companies operate, they still adhered to out-dated management models, rules and conventions. The current management model, centred on control, efficiency and coordination, no longer holds. It often constrains imagination, blocks creativity and stifles innovation. Hamel contended that bringing management to the Twenty-first century would require challenging and overcoming legacy beliefs.

The old models no longer suffice in a world where increasingly adaptability and creativity drive business success. Hamel therefore maintains that the challenge of developing a management model that is fit for the future would require the development of management innovation and new ways of engaging with mobilising talent, allocating resources, and building strategies.

The added challenge for project managers would be to similarly embrace creativity and innovation and apply them across temporary, unique and transient endeavours.

### **The future of project management**

There are many reasons why we need to refocus the discussion on improving the management of projects. Chief amongst them is Hamel's contention that long-term success depends on management innovation.

The world of projects has changed dramatically. The old models appear less relevant. Successful delivery of projects increasingly calls for new skills and specialisms that appear to reside outside the main scope of traditional project management. Agile and lean methods offer adaptability, while social technologies encourage new methods of communication. Big data enables the mining of information and greater flexibility is expected in all operations. With stakeholder and public expectations growing alongside the complexity of new undertakings, and the tolerance of failure ever-falling, the expectation that the profession can deliver what was previously considered impossible increases with every new ground-breaking project achievement.

In order to succeed in this new world, we need to embrace change, invite disruptive innovation, invent new business models and consider new ways of changing the enterprise. The development of organisational and professional nimbleness is key to acquiring the new skills.

There are many opportunities to raise the bar, innovate and lead. The key to new success will depend on our ability to adapt to change, to new environments, to novel challenges, to improving technologies, to integrated markets, to empowered customers, to digital convergence and to a new marketplace. Our power to deliver, innovate, satisfy and respond to challenges ultimately hinges on our ability to adapt, respond, innovate and grow.

The good news is that there is plenty of innovation and fresh new thinking in the ranks of project management. The last twenty years have seen many amazing projects and programmes that have defied complexity and transformed our view of what might be possible.

Progress relies on the pioneers willing to think outside the box. Progress also hinges on identifying new ideas and perspectives that are needed to underpin the discipline of project management. Managers work with people, establish coalitions and alliances, engage with organisations, and endeavour to establish trust, overcome resistance and make change stick. The book brings together experts and practitioners who are challenging the boundaries of project management by emphasising alternative perspectives, views and concepts that address fundamental aspects that relate to the delivery of projects, change, innovation and improvement.

## **Raising the bar**

The exploration of new landscapes can prove an exciting and challenging endeavour. The book offers a wealth of new ideas, models and perspectives, encouraging new conversations around projects and project management. It also serves as a way of engaging with some of the brightest innovation in project practice. What is particularly encouraging is that the ideas on offer have been tried and tested, and thus offer a tempting menu of new ways of thinking about and managing projects.

Projects provide an exciting arena where human ambition and daring imagination continue to drive societal endeavours and achievements. In the last decade we have seen many great successes including: The London Olympic games, Europe's tallest building, the shard, testing of the world's first 1000mph car, Bloodhound and numerous significant infrastructure projects to build airports, bridges, motorways, railways, ports, flood defences, nuclear power stations and music and sport stadiums.

Many other projects never make the news, which probably means that they were delivered successfully without major disruptions. But life does not stand still. The bar, it seems, is always being raised and with it the expectations regarding what can be achieved through projects and the ambition and appetite to deliver more.

Over the years, commentators have noted that achievement often motivates the next cycle of endeavours as humans seek longer bridges, taller buildings, faster cars and more responsive and integrated systems. Extending our reach inevitably means taking a chance and testing the limits of our capability and knowledge, especially in the context of project work.

Greater ambition also signals the need to accommodate rising levels of complexity, uncertainty, ambiguity and change. Meanwhile, as we learn to cope with a world that is more volatile, multifaceted and interconnected, yet risky, we need to hone our skills and capabilities.

Attempting more demanding undertakings requires innovative new methods for delivering, guiding and managing projects. The rise in complexity, uncertainty and ambiguity requires new ways of thinking about projects. But ultimately, there is a great variation between high performing organisations and projects and low performing projects which introduce significant risks to the organisations undertaking them.

New demands for greater accountability, governance, benefits realisation, value delivery, extended life cycles, wider stakeholder communities will continue to stretch and challenge project managers. Indeed, many of the new demands relate to the performance and endurance of projects, but are not part of project management as it is currently conceived.

## **Identifying key themes**

While the 45 contributions offer a rich and diverse bounty of concepts, models and perspectives that encourage new conversations around projects and project management,

the following seven overarching themes emerge as the key trends and changes that merit our attention:

**People:** Projects are about people but project management says little about this aspect. Yet, people are difficult to include, plan for, and satisfy. Methods to deliver improved project experiences increasingly account for the human aspects of projects and better address stakeholders, motivation, needs discovery, engagement, marketing, influencing, persuading and understanding of users and their role.

Examples of such new methods include:

- Systemic evaluation of the spheres of influence
- Driving stakeholder engagement by role and contribution
- Determining the (human) pace of progress
- Repositioning projects as “social endeavours”
- Focusing on gatekeepers, customers, client chains, and contractors as stakeholders
- Utilizing choice engineering
- Fostering project resilience
- Considering the methodology of compelling behaviours

**Leadership:** A theme that emerges from the different conversations in the project space, including those highlighted in the book, is the need to move from managing to leading. Managing is the hallmark of certainty and a control-oriented perspective, while leadership points to a different and more varied skill set. The combination of uncertainty and a greater reliance on a network of participants requires a more organic approach emphasising influence, participation, and collaboration.

**Context:** Projects rely on situational and contextual factors that managers need to understand. Interacting with projects in complex environments requires an awareness of the specific characteristics, including informational, contextual, strategic, geomorphological, geological, environmental, and public perception considerations and a willingness to experiment and adapt.

**Strategy:** Project management is concerned with the delivery of projects, while projects link strategy and execution. Improving the alignment between strategy and execution requires strategic or organisational or portfolio level engagement from project professionals.

**Value:** Projects are often created to satisfy strategic needs and objectives and therefore project management is increasingly called upon to deliver benefits and value. However, it is completed projects that satisfy users by subsequently providing benefits, and not project management per se. For example, a bridge does not deliver a benefit stream until travellers begin to use it to move across to the other side of town. This is an important lesson to digest. Benefit realisation and value delivery capability can be linked to projects, but only via a strategic, or organisational, frame of thinking that extends beyond execution.

**Long-term thinking:** The long-term perspective is often invoked to consider ethics, decision making, return on investment, benefits realisation, value accumulation, decommissioning, extended life cycles and warranty periods. It is here that the distinction between temporal project management (focused on delivery to predefined schedules and budgets), and the sustained outcomes, and even outputs of a project, come into play. Sharing knowledge, resources and talent often requires organisational considerations that extend beyond any single project. Similarly, as project managers are asked to relate to a wider horizon, or adopt an extended life cycle, they enter a different level of conversation about the project and its impacts. They therefore need new ways of reasoning for this type of conversations such as employing new and extended methods of addressing multiple levels of success, timely engagement modes and ultimate project outcomes.

**Innovation:** Hamel's work made a case for innovation as a key to refreshing and sustaining management thinking, for indeed long term success comes from management innovation. Innovation and experimentation feature in conversations about requirements, resilience, decision making and new mindsets as they provide essential learning opportunities for validating and improving performance. Moreover, adaptation, trial-and-error and resilience enable managers to adjust and respond to the unknown. Innovation can lead to bold new suggestions, such as, audited project accountants, matching supplier organisation life cycles to product delivery lifecycles, the application of coaching techniques, or the use of a timing- and phasing- sensitive stakeholder engagement models.

### **What are the implications of these new ways of thinking?**

Adopting the emerging themes has interesting ramifications for professionals and offers a potential for a re-positioning of the discipline of project management.

Firstly, the trends and changes imply adjustments to the role and importance of project managers. Participating in strategic conversations, innovating, delivering value and aligning projects with business strategy require a more central position. Engaging in a range of strategic roles may lead to the re-emergence of the professional thinker, integrator, and synergy-aware and stakeholder savvy executive with greater organisational understanding and clearer links to strategy, benefits, value and impacts.

Secondly, multiple perspectives, alternative lenses, and the use of fresh metaphors may support the development of complementary options and arrangements for projects and lead to fundamental improvements in the approaches employed by project managers in accounting for wider areas and interests. Formulation of projects relies on the perceptions we hold. If we are able to question and challenge the purpose, value, and outcomes of proposed undertakings and view them from alternate vantage points, we may be able to conceive more useful and meaningful projects that deliver essential benefits and address real concerns and issues.

Thirdly, we require a new understanding of project success, an idea that is explored in the various chapters of the book and other recent work. Success in the future will demand deeper engagement with the business. It also implies an acute understanding of the values and preferences of different, yet much wider, circles of stakeholder communities, possibly

arranged in complex and interconnected ecologies embracing supply chains, coalitions, spheres of influence, and common values and preferences. Persuasion, influence, timely engagement with stakeholders, and time-related communication can make systems more appealing and relevant. Participation, consultation and involvement in shaping the requirements would achieve greater buy-in and increased relevance, making users more likely to adopt the system, and thereby enabling benefits to begin to accrue.

The set of concerns is likely to encompass sustainability and survivability issues, extended time horizons, and the impact of wider communities with shared interests. Greater sensitivity to context, consideration of the different phasing of lifecycles, and adding a longer-term perspective would allow the focus to shift from efficiency of execution to an extended lifecycle perspective. Consideration of relevant performance measures through big data will enable projects to realise value, look beyond goals and deliver projects at a sustainable pace. This will support change, adaptation, and resilient posturing and enable organisations to better accommodate urgent and unexpected perturbations. The old tools and approaches that characterise the classic mindset will thus be augmented by new thinking mechanisms and reflection skills, such as reasoning about multiple levels of success, determining the pace of projects, utilising resilience modes, and applying complexity, humanistic, and systemic models, all of which will help practitioners balance ethical, economic, and environmental considerations.

The new themes point to new priorities in terms of leading people, repositioning projects, redefining success, and focusing on the delivery of value in the new world of projects. Many of the ideas can be easily adapted to augment current practices. Others may provide the seed for developing future improvements in project practice. Used together they enable project professionals to begin to innovate, refresh, and enrich their existing repertoire of methods and approaches applicable in project work and develop a project management suited for the demands of the 21st Century.

## **References**

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**Darren Dalcher**, Ph.D. HonFAPM, FRSA, FBCS, CITP, FCMI, SMIEEE, SFHEA is Professor of Project Management at the University of Hertfordshire, 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 in 2008 and was voted Project Magazine’s “Academic of the Year” for his contribution in “integrating and weaving academic work with practice”. In October 2011 he was awarded a prestigious lifetime Honorary Fellowship from the Association for Project Management for outstanding contribution to the discipline of project management. 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 delivered lectures and courses in many leading institutions worldwide, and has won multiple awards and prizes. He has written over 200 papers and book chapters on project management and software engineering and published over 30 books. He is Editor-in-Chief of the *Journal of Software: Evolution and Process* published by John Wiley. He is the editor of the book series, *Advances in Project Management*, published by Routledge and of the companion series, *Fundamentals of Project Management*. Heavily involved in a variety of research projects and subjects, Professor Dalcher has built a reputation as 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 in the UK and beyond.

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