Inaugural lecture

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> **Project management needs a collected effort. It is not an 'I' or 'Me' process. It is a 'We', 'Us' and 'Our' process.**

People, projects, project management and organisational behaviour: A mutualistic symbiotic relationship?

Introduction

Projects and project management have been around for centuries and people have always had a key part to play. Thanks to project management, people throughout the world have been able to plan, execute and deliver audacious and gigantic projects and achieve the unthinkable. The Pyramids in Egypt, the Great Wall of China and putting a man on the moon are just a few examples and many of these were achieved without the project management insight we now have today.

And yet, even after centuries of project management experience and developmental support, we still seem to struggle to manage and deliver projects successfully (Atkinson 1999; Cooke-Davies 2002; Munns & Bjeirmi 1996; Shenhar et al. 2001).

In practice, according to Lechler (cited in Cooke-Davies, 2002), people are the reason projects and project management succeed or fail. Atkinson (1999), Morris et al. (2006) and Shenhar et al. (2001) all refer to project management in broad terms. It is not just about delivering projects that are **high quality**, **on-time** and **within budget** (also referred to as the 'Iron Triangle').

As a field of study, Morris et al. (2006) propose that project management needs a more interpretivist research approach, as the majority of studies are still conducted in the positivist paradigm (Positivists belief that there are general patterns of cause -

and-effect that can be used as a basis for predicting and controlling natural phenomena). Human interaction is an important part of project performance and project management and should be more rigorously researched by adopting qualitative research paradigms. Interpretive methodologies encompass an experience-near orientation that sees human action as meaningful and historically contingent (Walsham, 1995).

Therefore, I propose it is time to rethink the concept of project management. Project management knowledge needs to evolve. We also need a broader, more strategic interpretation of the 'management of projects' as a whole.

The holistic open system

Project management is massive. For example, according to the Project Management Institute (PMI 2013) more than 1.3 million new project management roles will be needed in Brazil alone by 2020. Every industry wants to engage in project management as a means to improve their competitiveness and business performance.

As a result, people who do not have the necessary levels of competence are getting involved with projects and project management hoping to acquire the skills needed whilst on the job. However, it has been proven that people who have the competence to practically utilise project management methods and tools will manage more projects successfully (Papke-Shields, Beise & Quan 2010).

Unfortunately, these skills are not necessarily developed in traditional project management training. People who have been traditionally trained often have a narrow perspective of time, cost and quality and do not necessarily comprehend the bigger picture. Yet, it is the bigger picture that provides an understanding of how a mutualistic symbiotic relationship between people, projects, project management and organisational behaviour as an enabler impacts on project performance and its related benefits. This bigger picture is also known as the holistic open system presented in Figure 1.
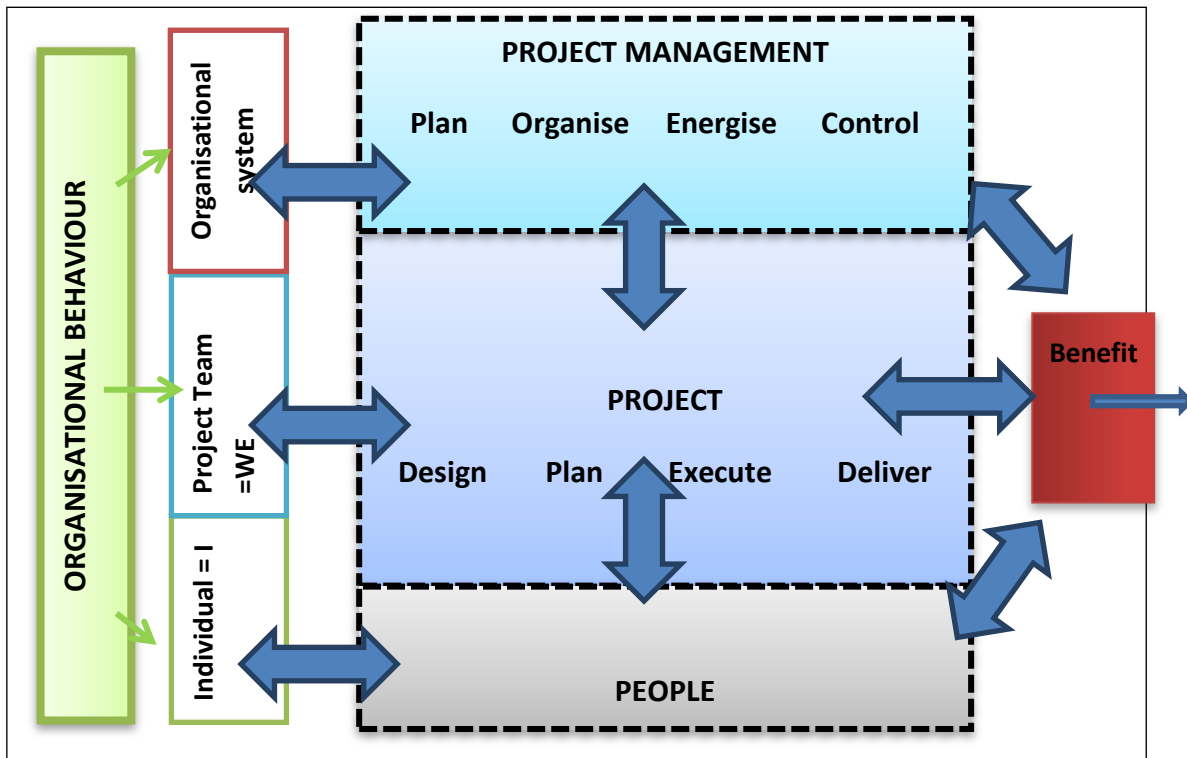
Figure 1: The holistic open system of the mutualistic symbiotic relationship of people, projects and project management with organisational behaviour as enabler (Author's own).

The lecture

My lecture offers a theoretical perspective providing logic for the application of a mutualistic symbiotic relationship between people, projects, project management and organisational behaviour. It will also present a practical perspective viewing this relationship through the lens of organisational behaviour.

I will start by providing a definition of the concepts. I will then use the three interrelated levels of organisational behaviour as a lens through which to discuss how each level can facilitate the mutualistic symbiotic relationship between concepts to enable a win-win outcome, mutual success or sustainable benefit of projects and its management.

It is much easier to talk about people, projects and project management in isolation and why each succeeds or fails to perform or deliver. What exactly are we talking about when we look at all of these concepts as a mutualistic symbiotic relationship?

To understand the whole we first need to understand the parts. We need to comprehend what is meant by people, a project, project management, organisational behaviour and a mutualistic symbiotic relationship.

Is our lack of understanding of the whole open system of projects and its management within a specific context the reason why we succeed or fail? And if we do comprehend the holistic construct, can we, or are we using it?

Remember – there is no universally accepted definition for people, a project, project management and organisational behaviour and it is difficult to define these concepts as there are two different perspectives – a narrow and a broad perspective.

The narrow perspective

The narrow perspective looks at specific project development from start to finish and the management of resources towards the project goal delivery at the end. Has the project delivered on time, within budget and to specification? This perspective only views people as a resource. It does not see people as influencers with power.

The broad perspective

The broad perspective looks at the total project lifecycle and its sustainable outcome contribution as a benefit to the people, the project, the organisation and the environment. It views people as pivotal to the success of projects and its management (Munns & Bjeirmi 1996).

In this lecture I adopt the broad perspective viewing:

- projects as a phenomena that should add value both during and beyond a defined delivery date;
- people and organisational behaviour as important parts of the whole project management system.

It has always been my opinion, supported by the research done by Atkinson (1999) and Morris et al. (2006) that we need to look at project management from a broader holistic perspective rather than simply as short term deliverables.

Definition of concepts

Mutualistic symbiotic relationship

A mutualistic symbiotic relationship is when two beings or entities of different kinds 'work together' each benefiting from the relationship. Beings (people) or entities (projects and project management) in a mutualistic symbiotic relationship evolve together. Each is part of the other's environment so as they adapt to their environment they 'make use of' each other in a way that benefits both (http://symbioticrelationship.org/).

Who are the people?

People are all stakeholders including the 'I' and the 'We'. People are individuals, team members and those in an institution or environment who have an interest or the power to influence a project and its management through their ability or behaviour.

What is a project?

A project is the work that needs to be done according to a defined plan. It is a sequence of connected activities within a unique scope of work targeted towards generating a well-defined outcome, and undertaken by a group of people in an organisation to achieve beneficial change. It usually carries considerable uncertainty and risk requiring integration within the organisation and is subject to constraints (boundaries) of time, cost and quality of performance.

What is project management?

Project management is a multidisciplinary science and art that integrates people and resources in a systematic process of activities in order to achieve a common or shared goal that has beneficial outcomes. To successfully manage a project we need to understand the context and complexity of the type of project we have to

manage, and where the delivery is going, for the change or the outcome required to be beneficial.

Typically, all projects have some form of project charter or scope of work, a business justification, and (of course) a project sponsor. If closely analysed, projects also follow a lifecycle of phases from start to end. Some projects end prematurely and deliver no benefit and some projects end on time, within cost and within quality specifications, but still do not add real value or make a significant contribution to the economy, society or life.

Organisational behaviour

Organisational behaviour is the study of individual and group behaviour and dynamics in an organisational setting, in this case the behaviour, its antecedents and effects in an organisation that engages in project work. There are three interrelated levels:

1. **Individual** (your life and the 'I' in projects and project management);
2. **Group** (the collective, the team and the 'We' in projects and project management);
3. **Organisational system** (the business, organisation, institution and context in projects and project management).

I will now discuss the application and use of people, projects and projects management in a mutualistic symbiotic relationship using this trifocal lens of organisational behaviour.

The individual, your life and the 'I' in projects and project management
This is my journey – What was your journey?

My conscious project management journey started in the mid 1980's when I engaged in corporate projects, mainly system-based projects, sometimes also referred to as 'soft' projects as they did not involve 'bricks and mortar'. I was told about the

importance of critical path analysis, project schedules and Gantt charts, work breakdown structures, deliverables, milestones and many other technical and methodological terms traditionally used in project management.

Thirty years of involvement in project management has shown me that it is not just a technical competence for engineering, construction and IT organisations. Integrating people, projects, project management and organisational behaviour as a collective and holistic phenomena presents a great 'philosophy' with a set of values that can enrich all our lives and assist us in the planning, execution, delivery and outcomes of successful sustainable projects providing multiple benefits along the extended project lifecycle.

'The project management philosophy'

From my research, readings and experience I have developed the following 13 inherent values that I believe should be adopted as the 'project management philosophy':

1. Seek to understand the project scope and context in order to plan a project.
2. Take time and care with planning before executing a project.
3. Think through and beyond the project lifecycle – it is not just about the beginning and the end, it is also about delivery and handover and much more.
4. Every project has an end which is also a new start or beginning of the next phase in a system. It is a beneficial change process.
5. Time and timing is important.
6. Be disciplined in your approach – something that all those involved must understand.
7. Cultivate and show respect for people diversity through sound interpersonal relations, focused communication and emotional intelligence.
8. Be cost conscious and economically wise.
9. Money buys the necessary resources, but money can also corrupt.
10. Determine customer needs and provide a quality outcome down the value chain to the end-user.
11. Seek and ensure competence of people and teamwork – you cannot do it alone.
12. Projects represent change and change comes with risks and resistance – manage it.

13. Learn from your mistakes – do not hide them.

I have fostered these values and tried to live them. Sometimes it has been difficult, but when I challenged these values I became less successful in my project work and life.

My journey

In 1998, I started my MBA journey and again I was confronted with the formal theory and practice of project management. There was no way I could pass all the subjects, be a full-time employee with challenging work and be married with children and I was concerned that I was not smart enough to complete this MBA programme whilst handling multiple projects on my own. However, I made it work by treating my assignments as projects and realising I was dependent on my work colleagues, my family and my MBA syndicate group for support.

My previous experience and inquiring mind started asking more questions about project management and successful projects. I asked myself "if we are so great at project management methodology and have all this experience from centuries ago, why are we still struggling to get projects delivered on time, within budget and with quality outcomes that are economically and/or socially sustainable?"

I had also successfully completed my MBA by applying a broad approach to my studies. And this broad perspective had helped me realise what I had learnt and how I had grown as a person.

The end of the MBA was the beginning of my PhD and thanks to my extensive business acumen I completed a PhD with specialisation in organisational behaviour. My PhD thesis was on "The development of an assessment tool for measuring project management culture in organisations".

Again I questioned why does project management succeed or fail. My argument was that if an organisation or institution wants to be successful in project management (broad perspective) it should have an organisational culture that supports project

management or a project management culture that embraces the philosophy and values above.

In November 2002 I joined academia on a full-time basis to continue to build on my project management skills and resulting enquiry. Every curriculum and study guide I developed, every paper or article I wrote and every Master's and PhD study I supervised was projectised using the philosophy, practices and principles of project management as I understood it.

My journey or life project has not yet ended. For example, over this 12 year period, I have successfully delivered more than 40 Master's and 14 PhD's despite other work engagements. People often ask me "How do you get it right? Have you got a life?" My simple answer is: "If you do not have a life – get one. Get a project life and embrace project management as a holistic mutualistic symbiotic relationship through the trifocal lens of organisational behaviour and reap the benefits".

The collective, the team and the 'We' in project management

In the past, project management theory emphasised the importance of tasks or getting things done on time, within budget and with quality (also referred to as the technical competence or the 'Iron Triangle').

Today, the theoretical domain is dominated by the human or people aspect i.e. how we interact and behave in order to deliver tasks. It is argued that to get results as a manager you need to strike a balance between effective task-oriented practices and effective people-oriented practices, with the balance currently favouring the people-side of the equation (Longenecker & Simonetti 2001). A critical differentiator between success and failure, as mentioned by Posner & Kouzes (2012), is the ability to work well with others, to enable others and not just to act on your own.

As the sequence of activities in a project increases and requires different competencies to execute them the more interdependent we become. This compels us to work collectively and in collaboration. Project management and project work

have always recognised the importance of teamwork, but somehow we have failed to break down the individual barriers or silo mentality. As soon as we bring two people together to work on achieving a common goal, such as in a project, we have to realise that they might not see the 'commonality' as each one may still approach the goal individually. For example, it is a person's abilities, needs, perceptions, personality and attitudes that drive behaviour.

As human behaviour is complex and there are no behavioural recipes, it is difficult to give a simple explanation of human behaviour especially in an organisational context. Traditionally, behaviour (B) was conceptualised as the result of the combination of individual elements (P) and environmental factors (E). This Person-Environment (PE) fit theory, based on Ekehammar's interactional psychology (cited in Adamopoulos, 1982), and Kurt Lewin's widely accepted formula, **B = f (P, E)** states that behaviour is a function (f) of the person and the environment.

More recently, research on PE fit theory suggests it is the interaction between individual characteristics (needs, abilities and values) and environmental characteristics (job enablers, job demands and organisational values) that result in attitudes and behaviour (Adkins, Ravlin & Meglino, 1996; Cable & Judge 1996; Saari & Judge 2004). Yu (2009) took this further and added work-based affect to the model of PE fit, explaining how individuals' mood and emotions and the management of these at work also have an impact.

If individual project team members are not aligned with each other, do not understand the others' roles and responsibilities and are not fully engaged with the specific project objective as a common goal, then the project management attempt will result in failure. Every individual will run a solo race in their own direction using up resources meant for project delivery and the achievement of a common goal rather their own gain. Again this proves the importance of a mutualistic symbiotic relationship. Project management can be successful if we understand teamwork and manage team dynamics to achieve a common goal.

We might be lucky and an individual or some individuals will work themselves into a 'coma' to deliver, while others just come and collect the bonus. However, when this

happens, respect, trust and interpersonal relations break down leaving a permanent disconnection between people resulting in problems in the project and its management.

The business, organisation, institution and context in project management

In the new economy, where the competitive edge is gained by providing products and services faster and cheaper, competition has become fiercer and companies are expected to perform in new and turbulent business environments. For this and other reasons, more enterprises are turning to project management and the application of project management principles and practices to help them gain a competitive edge (Atkinson 1999; Morris et al. 2006).

When project management was first introduced as a management tool, it was regarded as the sole preserve of the building and construction industries, and later also the military. As a result, the development of project management was traditionally limited to the technical field as a developmental and commercial endeavour.

As an organisation, business or institution how do you see project management and your ability to delivery sustainable projects by utilising competent people and resources to achieve beneficial change?

Any organisation that engages in project and project management must diagnose if their organisational culture is supportive of project work and if they have the necessary competence to engage in project work. This is also referred to by some researchers as 'project management maturity' as an evolving model for understanding and improving project management (Hartman & Skulmoski 1998). Often, very competent people are appointed to run projects, but the organisation fails to support them to deliver or in general the organisation does not have 'project management maturity'.

The future of project management lies in research to create new knowledge. Therefore, I especially want to appeal to the academic institutions to embrace project management as a critical competence in delivering research outputs with value adding outcomes. We need to encourage the adoption of a project management culture. Managers and individuals need to have 'project management intelligence' and institutions need to have 'project management maturity'.

In academia we are as guilty as those who deliver projects on time, within budget and against quality specification with a short-term success delivery. Many of our research deliverables are only projects with a start and an end (narrow perspective) and the resulting papers then gather dust on library shelves never to be used or referred to. We issue certificates as a project deliverable to our successful students, but are these certificates really preparing our students to add value? Is the end of their academic project really a beneficial change and the beginning of a new feasible project or sustainable career?

We need an interpretivist approach to research into project management as proposed by Morris et al. (2006). I call on the academic research community to view the multi-disciplinary nature of project management as a holistic construct and to address the points articulated in this lecture. If we rely on the project management associations, who are often in conflict with each other, to tell the academics what to think and teach, instead of researching the concepts theoretically and the related issues practically, we will stay or become complaisant and lose our competitive edge for funding and business support.

We need to ask ourselves the following questions:
- We are talking about extensive research projects but do we have the necessary support from Higher Education and Business in South Africa to really compete against international institutions against which we are benchmarked?
- Do we have a team approach to our research projects?
- Are we still in a silo mentality trying to keep things close to our own chest?
- Are we suffocating in our lack of ability to see the bigger picture?

- As project management is multi-disciplinary: are we embracing cross-disciplinary research or are we still trying to protect our own turf?
- Are we in our organisations embracing project management as a holistic construct with a mutualistic symbiotic relationship between and amongst people, projects and project management looking through the lens of organisational behaviour?

Conclusion

I have posed many questions to the individual, the group and the organisation relating to project management capability. You could be an individual or a student trying to improve your work through project management. You might manage a business and apply project management to achieve strategic or business goals. You could be an academic trying to deliver students who can make a positive difference through your teaching, delivering Master's and PhD's or publishing collaborative research outputs with valuable outcomes. However, regardless of who you are, where are you taking project management and your work as a project? Are you going to get it right or not? It is your choice. You have the means to embrace project management but it is still up to you to make it a sustainable success.

Today, projects are regarded as a key management tool and project management as an extension of management in a specific application. It therefore applies in all areas of the business world and is regarded by management gurus, such as Peter Drucker, as 'the management approach of the 21st Century'. Project management is a constantly growing and challenging emerging profession where failure is easy and success is more difficult.

My contribution as academic to the plight of project management, its evolution and appointing a more interpretivist paradigm to research is to contribute further to the people aspects of project management and the organisational behavioural perspective. We must not forget that: "*it is people who make projects successful and it is their behaviour that often makes projects fail*" (Du Plessis et al. 2014).

Project management: a behavioural perspective

I have managed to deliver many national and international conference papers and accredited journal articles on the subject field of project management and organisational behaviour and plan to do many more, especially in the African context. My latest major project, completed in September 2014, is a thought provoking book. It is titled 'Project management: a Behavioural Perspective' and is published by Pearson South Africa. There are 14 chapters, which I edited and contributed to six chapters as author, with themes ranging from 'project complexity and paradoxes' to 'emotional intelligence', and 'power and political behaviour' in projects and its management. This book project came to fruition as a result of a mutualistic symbiotic relationship and it views project management through the lens of organisational behaviour. I am hopeful it will be a valuable source and benefit many students, managers and practitioners in South Africa, Africa and beyond.

How to make project management work

It is up to every one of us to make project management work. This includes individuals, teams and organisations. We must:

- understand the philosophy and embrace the values of project management and we must also live it;
- develop our own competence and build a competent project team;
- align our organisational strategies and projects as enablers and manage our institutions in support of sustainable project delivery through proper planning and scope management, integration and not through a silo mentality;
- direct our energy towards collective goal achievement and monitor delivery in a disciplined and ethical manner;
- learn and add value through our projects;
- provide or solicit the necessary support.

In conclusion it is my plea that we strive to get it right, because we can add value and sustainable benefits through well-managed projects. We owe it to ourselves, our children, our nation, our world.

"Whatever we do must be in accord with human nature. We cannot drive people; we must direct their development. The general policy of the past has been to drive; but the era of force must give way to the era of knowledge, and the policy of the future will be to teach and lead, to the advantage of all concerned" (Henry L. Gantt (1861-1919).

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