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Project management: a profession with a hole in its head or, why a change in the culture of academic support is needed for the profession

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Project management is a practice-oriented discipline. What should be the role of senior academics as experts in project management knowledge? And given that some of the knowledge needed to manage projects is skill based as well as theoretical and conceptual, what can we say should be the distinctive area of knowledge that defines the profession? This paper notes the difficulty academics have in presenting the discipline as a whole and proposes in consequence that they become more involved in practice. Action research and coaching would be two means of doing this, to the benefit of both practitioners and academics.

Keywords: Coaching, discipline of p.m., knowledge, practice.

Introduction: are professors experts?

I recently conducted a review of a firm's project management practices. Before beginning the presentation of my findings to the assembled staff I was asked to introduce myself, which I did with my usual modesty and, more to the point, in doing so emphasized my practical credentials—my practice-based c.v. 'But you're also a professor of project management' the Chief Executive, who had sponsored the review, said. His interjection frankly, and maybe to my shame, surprised me. To him the fact that the review had been carried out by someone who was apparently so evidently an expert that he was a professor really meant something.

A professor is indeed meant to be an intellectual leader in his, or her, discipline. I accept this—indeed, I am proud of it and assiduously seek to demonstrate it—but saying this begs the question of the type of knowledge that an intellectual leader in a practice-based discipline such as project and programme management should generate and articulate, and how valuable such knowledge is. Professors tend to dwell in conceptual knowledge. How is conceptual knowledge valuable in a practice-based field? Are the real experts, *pace* the Chief Executive, not likely to be practitioners rather than theoreticians? If industry wanted advice on a project management problem, would they not rather go to a leading practitioner? (The answer would depend on the individuals but probably to the practitioner.) So, what is the use of theoretical knowledge in such a practice-oriented field; and since mastery of a distinctive area of knowledge is one of the requisites of a profession, what then is the nature of the knowledge of which the profession of project management has a special relationship?

This paper proposes that ways need to be found to integrate the practical, experientially derived knowledge on how best to manage projects and programmes with that which is abstract, conceptual and pre-eminently theoretically based.

Project management's professional challenge

A profession can be characterized *de minimus* as ownership of a distinct body of knowledge: what knowledge one needs in order to practice competently. (Other characteristics include qualified members of the profession being allowed to work independently, unsupervised, to a code of ethics and to standards established

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and regulated by the professional body: Hodgson and Muzio, 2011.)

The primacy of ownership of a distinctive knowledge base raises the question of just what that knowledge is, whose is it, and who articulates (identifies, structures and communicates) it and how? Traditionally in professions academia has played a leading role in formalizing this: 'a profession's formal knowledge system is ordered by abstractions … [whose classification] is dictated by its custodians, the academics' (Abbott, 1992, p. 53). Academia, with its opportunities to seek out data and explore theories, is generally better placed than practitioners to think abstractly, formulate overall conceptual models, test theoretical propositions, expand the width of thinking, emphasize rigour of development and articulation, respect the role of data and communicate clearly. Without this academic discipline (so to speak) one can get into the position we are in with the *PMBOK® Guide* which, reflecting the lack of a mature academic base at the time of its composition in the mid-1980s, has the wrong objectives, an inappropriate structure and the wrong knowledge in it (Morris, 2013) (see Box).

Box A short critique of how the *PMBOK® Guide* fails to reflect current academic thinking

From the outset PMBOK was not intended to represent the full scope of knowledge required to manage projects. Hence, it is no surprise that the structure does not support such an aim. The *Guide*'s structure reflects a simple 'initiate→ plan→ execute→ monitor and control→ close' process relative to 10 areas: scope, time, cost, quality, human resources, communications, risk, contract/procurement, integration and stakeholder management. Unfortunately, this means several important aspects of knowledge are missed.

The importance of the project development life cycle—the one feature of projects that distinguishes them from non-projects—is largely ignored. This leads to a number of problems. It fails to bring out the characteristics of the project life cycle—and its stages, and their impacts of these on the management of projects. Insufficient weight is given for managing the front-end definition development stages and to the establishing of cost, schedule and other targets and to the definition of scope. The spirit of the Guide has been and essentially still is an execution one: post 'requirements "collection"' with no mention of developing or shaping the project. (Though the fourth and fifth editions have moved to diminish this emphasis.)

Even the knowledge that is suggested as 'unique' to project management was, as such, questionable, for non-project undertakings also involve many of the things identified in *The Guide*. On the other hand, many of the things that have been shown to be important in the effective management of projects (not least through its excellent publications, sponsored research, and events) are missing: technology, strategy, etc., and leadership and people now rest largely in Human Resource Management and Appendix X3—with virtually no reference to any of the huge body of theory that is relevant to these topics. In fact such is the emphasis on the process and such the lack of theory that one might conclude that *The Guide* is not really a body of knowledge at all but rather a 'how to' process manual.

But if academia has an important role in processing and framing professional knowledge on the management of projects—and programmes, and portfolios—a number of questions arise, not least what is the knowledge and whose is it? There are several answers. One is to determine what topics should be included in the body of knowledge. As well as being obvious, this is very important: it shapes the scope and even the ontology of the discipline. For when we discuss 'project management' we need to recognize that there are semantic differences in the way the discipline is defined. Project management is a social construct: different groups have defined it in different ways at different times. Many organizations and individuals follow the *PMBOK® Guide* seeing it as essentially an execution discipline—a discipline that kicks in once the project targets have been set—which is what they want. On the other hand, many others subscribe to a broader view which sees the front-end shaping and developmental, definitional stage of projects as critical to the downstream effectiveness of a project. Thus in this view, the front-end needs managing as part of the total project management programme of work, although whether one calls the people managing this front-end project managers or study managers or development managers or something else is up to the enterprise. (And to further complicate matters, the project sponsor will also have a central role in the management of the project even though he, or she, will be organizationally distinct—'outwith'—the rest of the project team.)

When one expands the scope of the discipline like this, the knowledge that professors of project management (and those who would like to become such) need to have mastered, at least from a book knowledge sense, is large. But to make the task even more daunting, the knowledge really needed to help produce effective project outcomes in fact goes well beyond just book knowledge. For in a practice-based field like the management of projects there is skill-based knowledge and

behaviours in addition to the formal 'book' ones which are important too. Aristotle recognized this when he distinguished between theory-based knowledge (episteme) and skill-based knowledge (techne). He also proposed a third kind of knowledge: phronesis: 'practical wisdom': conceptualization: putting it all together to make something special of value.

As academics we naturally veer towards episteme and phronesis but skills and behaviours, crafts and competencies, are often extremely important kinds of knowledge that are also needed. We shall return to this topic later in this paper. For the moment, however, note that all three types of knowledge about the discipline need understanding, and that the kinds of knowledge that are distinctive to project and programme management need identifying.

To cover all of this is a big ask. It takes us well beyond just book knowledge. It demands experiential knowledge, across a very broad range of topics, some of which are quite technical and others which will be quite judgemental. Maybe, it can be objected, we are being too ambitious, particularly in opening the discipline up as I have suggested by referring to it as the broader 'management of projects'. Maybe we can have an expert understanding of the knowledge needed to manage projects by focussing just on parts of the overall body of knowledge: break it down into its elements. After all, many professional disciplines split into specialist areas—oncology, neuroscience, psychiatry and so on within medicine. We could specialize in programme management as opposed to execution-oriented project management perhaps. But this argument will not work if we really want to be expert in understanding what one needs to know in order to manage projects effectively, not least because it is as an overall integrative function that project management (using the term in its broadest sense) claims to have distinctive competence. The claims for being a profession are not made for sub-areas like project risk management, or project planning, but rather for the integrated assembly of the knowledge and the skills needed to successfully shape, develop and deliver projects (and programmes etc.). And, in reality, project and programme management are pre-eminently multidisciplinary, pluralistic, integrative disciplines. The whole point is to pull all the strands together to produce an outcome of value. The discipline's distinctive knowledge is at this level. This is where we need to focus.

Knowledge leadership

Yet the profession, with its many knowledge bases supporting the different elements which constitute it, and with its integrative aims and ontology, is notable for the absence of academics working at its overall summative level—on what 'it' and its knowledge are as a whole. Our academic tradition is to focus on specialist topics within the broad body of knowledge rather than on the discipline as a whole. But in the absence of academic enquiry at the level of the discipline as a whole, *project management is like a profession with a hole in its head:* a profession missing the level of academic input at its top that other professions would expect as normal. Without active work addressing issues at the overall, integrative level relevant to identifying, conceptualizing, understanding and shaping the knowledge needed for the overall discipline, the discipline, and hence the profession, lacks an important critical review. There is an absence of the grounded, holistic, practical knowledge that 'reflective practitioners', including academics, can, in the Schön sense (Argyris and Schön, 1974, Schön, 1983), reflect upon as part of their routine practice. A professional may aspire to instinctive decision-making, as Dreyfus and Dreyfus (2005) suggest, but instinct if not based genetically is born from education and experience. Pure instinct can easily be misguided. Without academic work on such a central aspect of its corpus of knowledge—overall integration—the profession is deprived of an important part of its cultural legitimacy. An essential focus of academic work in project and programme management therefore needs to be on the overall integrative level to build the discipline's formal book knowledge, skills and behaviours, and conceptual sense-making capability.

In fact the need for such overall help seems, amazingly, hardly to diminish, despite the years of study and development that have gone into project management since its inception as a formal discipline some 60 years or so ago. In its May 2013 report the UK's Cabinet Office, for example, revealed that of the 191 projects in the Government Major Project Portfolio, with a combined whole-life cost of £353 billion, and an annual cost of over £13 billion, 31—almost 1 in 6—had a delivery confidence rating of 'red' (non-viable) or 'amber/red' (in doubt). One of the biggest, the £331 million National Health Service Program for IT, has, at the time of writing, just been cancelled as 'not fit to deliver'. Simultaneously, the UK Parliamentary Accounts Committee excoriated a government project to set up nine regional control centres for fire and rescue services in England, describing it as one of the worst projects yet reported, £469 m being wasted as a result of the scheme's failure. It was a failure of doing, not of episteme. The craft and practice of doing projects need more attention.

Professional competence

In fairness, there has been a noticeable move in recent years amongst researchers towards the 'doing' aspects

of project management knowledge. There is renewed interest in contingency theory and the recognition that management can be effective in proactively influencing the project's environment, to a limited degree anyway. Strategy is now recognized as extremely important, not just in the opportunities it creates to think through the way the generic project management topics that will be used on the project, to what end and how, but in its dynamic application (Artto *et al.*, 2001; Morris and Jamieson, 2004; Gardiner, 2005): strategy, literally the art of the general, is a 'doing' thing. Flyvbjerg has been championing the application of behavioural psychology to estimating (Flyvbjerg *et al.*, 2002, 2003): lying latent is a wider opportunity in researching how standards are treated—as in the use of value engineering and team coaching to reduce capital cost targets and reach ambitious 'stretch targets'. Or there is the application of models of organizational culture to internalize increased Health and Safety requirements, and a general increase in interest in institutional management for building long-term enterprise project management capabilities (Mahalingam and Levitt, 2007; Morris, 2013). Behavioural topics like Emotional Intelligence (Goleman *et al.*, 2002) and trust (Mayer *et al.*, 1995) are high on the popular agenda. All these are ways of helping us perform better—improving 'doing project management'. But still the focus is on elements of the discipline, not really on the discipline—the profession—itself. Very few academics seem to want to tie back their findings into a broader reflection on what they might mean for the overall discipline or the profession.

In its application the profession must surely be interested in two things above all: ensuring the right competencies and capabilities are available; and producing a valued outcome: impact! Competency is the knowledge, skills and behaviours need to fulfil a role adequately. Capabilities, according to Davies *et al.*, are the organizational processes, systems, documents, etc. that together constitute the enterprise's project management infrastructure (Davies and Hobday, 2005; Morris, 2013). Ensuring these are adequate to meet the requirements posed by the project and its environment is not just obviously important but represents a research space that could be usefully occupied by academia. This said, it has yet to stimulate a substantial, coherent body of work. It is as though academia is neither sufficiently interested nor adequately grounded in the phronetic activity of sense-making at the overall, integrative level. Instead it seems more interested in discussing means, methods, theories, frameworks and techniques than in conceptualizing the discipline or relating such issues to project success. A concern with methodology and theory is entirely appropriate for academia, but there needs to be a concern too over ends—with project outcomes and benefits.

If only there could be a bridge to facilitate the two-way interaction between academics and practitioners! There might be a way but achieving it would require a substantial culture change not only amongst practitioners but also, and particularly, amongst academics. A good way to start would, I believe, be with competency.

The academic ought to be expert, at least from a theory viewpoint, on what 'good [best appropriate] practice' should be vis-à-vis management's needs. Through this, a dialogue should be available for theory and practice to assess what remedial or developmental actions should be taken to bridge the competency gap. In some instances academics could participate in implementing some of the analysis' recommendations. This directed line of research—almost a form of consulting—would provide a means for the academic to become involved in a real way with the practical issues facing managers of projects.

The method of engagement is almost a form of Action Learning, with particular emphasis on coaching.

Reg Revans' idea, 30 or more years ago, on Action Learning (Revans, 1980) was that effective learning requires a willingness to share experiences and to think openly, and that this is often best done by researchers and practitioners working together at the point of application. Much of the learning was to be done by and in small groups, aided by a facilitator or coach. Now it may be that on projects neither the issues are so puzzling (there is, after all, supposed to be a body of knowledge) nor the time available for executives to reflect intently for long enough to fit Revans' more expansive approach. But the idea of coaching seems remarkably pertinent. For how do practice-oriented disciplines, such as sport, music or drama, improve performance? By constant training, and through effective coaching. In all cases, third party advice—a director, teacher or coach—is common and generally rated invaluable. (Just look at the turnover of managers and coaching staff in premier soccer.) Advice is offered at the point of application, through application. Coaches would most naturally be 'past players'—past doers. But there is an opportunity for academics here too. For whilst most academics are unlikely to have the depth of practical experience that one would normally expect in a coach, the academic-as-coach would have a real skill to offer in listening to, and in framing, issues raised by the practitioner. If academics could fill such a role credibly—most would require specialist training in effective coaching—not only would they provide a service to project personnel, they would engage more directly with the reality of managing projects. And their ability to contribute to the shaping of project and programme management knowledge at the overall, integrative level—the distinctive body of knowledge of the profession—would be strengthened, often substantially.

Conclusions

Project and programme management are 'doing' disciplines. Supporting such a type of work requires project management to change as a discipline. It needs a culture more biased to practice. Academics working in project management would benefit from embracing this culture shift towards practice. Coaching, oriented around practical issues, possibly provided by appropriately trained academics, could be of value not only to those being coached (the project executives) but also, and this is the added bonus, to those doing the coaching (the academics in need of greater exposure to the management issues faced by people managing projects).

The needs of the discipline are fundamentally biased towards application, and towards the discipline as a broadly based, pluralistic, interdisciplinary approach to managing change. To engage with this wider agenda means that the culture of academic engagement with the discipline must change. Scholarship still is core, but there needs to be a greater focus on application and impact.

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