Choosing your words carefully: Leaders' narratives of complex emergent problem resolution

Liselore A. Havermans *, Anne Keegan, Deanne N. Den Hartog

University of Amsterdam Business School, Plantage Muidergracht 12, 1018 TV Amsterdam, The Netherlands

Abstract

As leaders, project and program managers use language as a vital tool in shaping their projects and programs. The ways in which leaders frame issues through their use of language impacts on how these issues are approached and resolved by members of the project team. In this study we explore the narratives of project and program managers in complex emergent problem resolution. We analyze interview data to show the storylines leaders construct regarding which groups are more or less important and the tensions between these groups, whether they frame the impact of outsiders as positive or negative, and how they portray the role of conflicting perspectives in problem resolution. We discuss the practical implications arising from our analysis of leadership narratives in the management of projects, the limitations of the current study and opportunities for future research.
© 2015 Elsevier Ltd. APM and IPMA All rights reserved.

Keywords: Leadership; Managing projects; Managing programs; Narratives; Qualitative; Complex emergent problems

1. Introduction

The project management literature has its roots in the engineering sector and is frequently characterized as having a strong functionalist and instrumental perspective (Blomquist, Hällgren, Nilsson, and Söderholm, 2010; Turner and Keegan, 2001). This has resulted in a focus on functional tools, the importance of defining sequential project phases, and an emphasis on the efficient achievement of predetermined goals within clearly defined time, budget and quality constraints (Cicmil, Hodgson, Lindgren, and Packendorff, 2009). Despite great efforts to understand and determine how projects can best be managed, many projects do not finish on time and within

budget, and do not end up where their initiators thought they would. Even when they achieve their predetermined goals, they are not always considered a success by the people involved (Bartis and Mitev, 2008; Boddy and Paton, 2004; Flyvbjerg, 2006).

Projects can generally be characterized as unique, novel and transient (Turner & Keegan, 1999) and often involve the development of customized, complex products consisting of interrelated sub-systems that require new knowledge (Hobday, 2000). The challenges of communication in the uncertain and ambiguous situations typical of more novel projects where goals and methods to attain them are not well defined are especially apparent (Turner and Cochrane, 1993). Work in novel projects tends to involve dealing with a series of complex emergent problems. These issues are complex in the sense that the development of events and the impact of actions cannot be predicted due to the variety of elements interacting with each other (Baccarini, 1996; Pich, Loch, and Meyer, 2002), and emergent in the sense that they emerge and unfold rather

unexpectedly during the course of the project. These issues can exhibit any of the dimensions of project complexity described in the extant literature such as structural, uncertainty, dynamics, pace and socio-political complexity (Geraldi, Maylor, and Williams, 2011; Hanisch and Wald, 2014).

A major challenge in novel projects, is solving complex emergent problems without proven methods (Turner and Cochrane, 1993) and requiring project leaders and participants in the project to try to develop an understanding of the situation and the methods that are needed to reach a moving target. The complexity of these emergent issues can increase the demand for information and communication processing, and also hinder these processes (Hanisch and Wald, 2014). The complexity, as experienced by project managers and others involved, calls for responses (Geraldi et al., 2011), however, which responses will be most adequate cannot be fully predicted so different perspectives are likely to emerge within project teams and require responses from project leaders.

Processes of mutual adjustment among team members in uncertain organizational situations become highly relevant for understanding work processes (Mintzberg, 1979). In ambiguous situations, language plays an important role in shaping the emergent reality through collective processes of sensemaking which are underpinned by communication (Alvesson and Kärreman, 2000; Boje, Oswick, and Ford, 2004; Dutton and Jackson, 1987; Phillips and Oswick, 2012). How projects are perceived and the way in which leaders and participants deal with emergent problems is thus heavily influenced by the language use of and narratives developed by leaders.

Narratives are defined as any spoken or written account of connected events (Oxford English Dictionary Online Definition of Narrative). Project leaders' narratives will shape reactions to a problem. For example, whether a leader categorizes an event as an opportunity or a threat influences how others respond (Dutton and Jackson, 1987). Whether projects are described by the leader as routine or ground-breaking, and whether others with an opinion about the project are described as a nuisance or as an important source of new ideas, depends upon how leaders frame the project and the role of others. This is likely to be especially important in projects where goals and methods for attaining them are unclear, as the project manager and project team will be confronted by an ongoing stream of emergent issues that have to be dealt with. In unclear situations, the narrative proposed by the project manager is likely to be more fluid and negotiable than when project goals and methods are clear.

In this paper we aim to develop a better understanding of the role of leaders' use of language and the narratives leaders create on how projects and programs are carried out. Firstly, we briefly highlight the so-called linguistic turn in management and organizational theory (Alvesson and Kärreman, 2000) and its implications for leadership in projects and programs. Secondly, we draw attention to the role of leaders' use of language in projects by empirically exploring the narratives project managers and program managers draw on when dealing with complex emergent problems. Finally, we discuss the implications of leaders' construction of narratives for the ways in which projects and programs are carried out.

1.1. The linguistic turn in management and organization theory

One of the most influential developments in organization studies of the last few decades is the linguistic turn (Alvesson and Kärreman, 2000) which places the role of language in action and organizing center stage (Boden, 1994; Weick, 2004). Instead of merely seeing language as a mirror of reality, language is viewed as a force shaping how processes occur and events emerge (Alvesson and Kärreman, 2000; Boje et al., 2004; Phillips and Oswick, 2012). From this perspective, the communication among organizational members about the ongoing stream of evolving issues they are confronted with is a form of social action. People interpret what is going on and test these interpretations on others (Weick, 1979). These collective processes of sensemaking actively shape the problems organizational members are trying to deal with. Language therefore creates opportunities for action that in turn constitute processes of organizing which we then recognize as self-evident (Cunliffe, 2001).

Though studies of organizations increasingly focus on language to shed light on complex organizational phenomena (Alvesson and Kärreman, 2000; Oswick, Keenoy, and Grant, 2000), this perspective is still relatively new to the project management literature. Many have pointed to the importance of good communication for project success (Bowen and Edwards, 1996; Henderson, 2004; Hyvari, 2006; Laufer, Shapira, and Telem, 2008; Loosemore and Muslmani, 1999; Pietroforte, 1997; Pinto and Pinto, 1990; Reed and Knight, 2010; S. R. Thomas, Tucker, and Kelly, 1998; Turner and Müller, 2004), but a view of language as constructing (instead of merely representing) project events is a less often forwarded perspective in the project management literature.

A number of scholars in the project management literature have explored the constructive role of language in projects. For example, Amtoft (1994) draws attention to the multiplicity of stories within and around the projects that can lead to failure of the project if not recognized. In addition, Gil (2010) shows how project managers use can language as a resource for communicating, specifically in contexts with conflicting interests with external stakeholders. His analysis of the verbal accounts produced by a senior project management team shows how these managers used language as a resource to manage tensions (Gil, 2010). Some authors who emphasize the importance of language as shaping projects propose a perspective on project management actuality and a focus on the lived experiences of practitioners (Cicmil, Williams, Thomas, and Hodgson, 2006; Cooke-Davies, Cicmil, Crawford, and Richardson, 2007; Packendorff, 1995). This entails a shift from the development of normative, prescriptive theories and what *should* happen to the development of descriptive theories based on studies of what is actually happening. A focus on leadership practices, including linguistic practices, can therefore be important in exploring everyday project realities (Packendorff, 1995). Project actuality research takes seriously that what people do in projects is embedded in, and shaped by, social processes of interaction and communication (Cicmil et al., 2006). Thus, the project is seen as co-constructed in everyday communicative interactions (Lindgren and Packendorff, 2007).