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# The improvement paradox in project contexts: A clue to the way forward?

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**Abstract**

This paper emerged as the authors struggled to make sense of a phenomenon observed during fieldwork. We had entered the field knowing a project-based organisation to be performing poorly and to be in need of improvement in its management of projects. We expected that the organisation would be actively trying to achieve the necessary improvement. We found that the organisation as a matter of course was not pursuing any improvement activities. It was only following a crisis with its major client that limited changes were introduced, and then business as usual resumed. This we have termed, the improvement paradox.

The paradox exists because there are two systems of logic operating: that of the researcher in forming the expectation of change and that of the organisation in not changing. Both of these systems provided insight. Our expectations reflected a bias for the logic that there was inherent goodness and desirability in improving PM practices. Furthermore, we are actors in an environment that actively promotes improvement and provides mimetic, coercive and normative pressures on an organisation to improve. The logic of the organisation was founded on complicity — between the organisation and its client, and between multiple levels of the organisation. This complicity was seen to be causal in maintaining a series of defensive routines — routines that perpetuated the status quo.

Further reflection revealed many paradoxes in the world of projects and project management. Given the prevalence of paradoxes perhaps we should move beyond labelling these phenomena to explore them more deeply and to contribute insights which better reflect the complexity and ambiguity in project contexts.


*Keywords:* Improvement paradox; Paradox; Best practice; Complicity; Theory development

> "Paradoxes are like the weather, something to be lived with, not solved, the worst aspects mitigated, the best enjoyed and used as clues to the way forward"Charles Handy, The Empty Raincoat, 1994.

## 1. Introduction

The idea for this paper emerged over a period of three years during which the authors struggled to make sense of a phenomenon they had observed in the course of some fieldwork. A few years ago, we were conducting some case study research on the value of project management in a project-based organisation that was contracted to design, develop and produce a major piece of military hardware, when we observed something we thought was strange at the time — the long-standing non-adoption of some basic project management practices and techniques that would have been beneficial, followed by the subsequent adoption of one well-established technique being acclaimed throughout the organisation as 'best practice'.

We tried to analyse this phenomenon using a variety of theoretical lenses — none of which could satisfactorily explain what we had observed. We then attempted to construct our own theorisation of the phenomenon, which we called 'complicity theory' because the phenomenon was only allowed to persist because of the complicity between the organisation and its major customer and between multiple levels of the organisation. But our theory of complicity proved to be very narrow in context — it is only useful where complicity exists. Where it is absent there is no need for the theory.

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We compared our original case study with another ongoing major project where many best practice/accepted/promising practices had been adopted — the construction of Heathrow's Terminal 5. At the time this was heralded as a great success and an example of a breakthrough in project management. However, a year later the terminal opening was described as a national disaster when multiple problems emerged that resulted in the cancellation of numerous flights and thousands of pieces of baggage being separated from their owners. So here was another paradox: how does a major success become a major failure almost overnight?

The paradoxes highlighted above are just two examples of the many paradoxes in the world of projects and project management that researchers and practitioners in the domain have identified. We realised that by focusing too narrowly on specific examples of paradox we could only develop theories of limited scope. Given the prevalence of paradoxes in the world of projects perhaps we should move beyond labelling these phenomena to explore them and to contribute insights "more in tune with organisational complexity and ambiguity" (Lewis, 2000). We suggest that as researchers of projects and project management we should pay more attention "to the opportunities offered by tensions, oppositions, and contradictions among explanations of the same phenomenon" (Poole and Van de Ven, 1989, 562) to help build theories of project management and project organising.

## 2. The improvement paradox

The Oxford English Dictionary defines a paradox as:

> "A seemingly absurd or contradictory statement or proposition which when investigated may prove to be well founded or true; a statement or proposition which, despite sound (or apparently sound) reasoning from acceptable premises, leads to a conclusion that seems logically unacceptable or self-contradictory; a person or thing that combines contradictory features or qualities."

Harvey (1988) citing Rapaport and Chammah (1970), notes that:

> "Paradoxes are only paradoxes because they are based on a logic or rationale that is different from what we understand or expect. Discovering the aberrant logic not only destroys the paradoxical quality, but also offers alternative ways for coping with similar situations." (Harvey, 1988, p.20).

As Poole and Van de Ven (1989) state:

> "Most contemporary theory construction methodologies attempt to build internally consistent theories of limited scope. Relatively little attention has been paid to the opportunities offered by the tension, oppositions, and contradictions among explanations of the same phenomenon." (p562)

They go on to distinguish four ways of working with paradox: (1) accept the paradox and use it constructively; (2) clarify levels of analysis; (3) temporally separate the two levels; and (4) introduce new terms to resolve the paradox.

Elsewhere, it has been suggested that significant advances in management and organisation theory might require us to better address paradoxes inherent in human behaviour and their social organisations (Cameron and Quinn, 1988). Lewis (2000) cites a growing number of researchers (e.g. Handy, 1994; Kets de Vries, 1995; Koot et al., 1996; Hatch and Ehrlich, 1993; Vince and Broussine, 1996) who have studied paradox. She notes that these researchers have abandoned the idea that change is a smooth, linear and planned journey. Rather they point out that contradictions both hamper and encourage organisational development. Lewis laments the fact that whilst the term is used by many in management research to the extent that it is in danger of becoming a cliché, few researchers explore paradox at greater depth.

She constructs a framework based on insights from psychology, philosophy and organisational studies around this to help understand key elements of paradox. She claims the framework clarifies: (1) how paradoxical tensions arise from polarised cognitive or social constructions, (2) how actors' defensive reactions might fuel reinforcing cycles, and (3) how actors can avoid becoming stuck in these paralysing and often vicious cycles via greater cognitive and behavioural complexity. She notes that formal logic is based on either/or thinking which is incapable of understanding the intricacies of paradox (Ford and Ford, 1994).

For the case we present here, there is a clear difference between our expectations and the reality of practice. The logic of our expectations was based on what we now recognise as a bias of our research. That is, there is a fundamental goodness and desirability of improving PM practices. Indeed, the work took place under the heading of 'The Value of Project Management.' Our finding, that improvement was neither rationalised as good nor inherently desirable clearly presented a paradox for us — *the improvement paradox.*

## 3. Summary of the observed phenomenon

The project we studied was to design, develop and eventually manufacture a new piece of military hardware. Right from the outset in 1996, it was subject to continual slippage and cost escalation. Just two years later the contractor informed the client that it was unlikely to meet timescales and a revised in-service date was agreed for March 2005. There followed a series of renegotiations of the contract terms as both sides revised their expectations for the project and introduced new approaches. By May 2002, for example, a new incremental approach to product delivery was adopted, that reflected a revised assessment of operations requirements. By the end of the year further slippage in both budget and time was disclosed by the contractor attributed to the underestimation of technology risks, which placed them under severe 'cost pressures,' making further contract negotiation necessary. The first full product test date was moved back from mid-2002 to end 2002, then to the second half of 2003. The situation failed to improve despite a plethora of advice resulting from 11 separate reviews that presented 255 issues to the management team. An independent audit report on the project described the situation as follows: