The praxis of 'alignment seeking' in project work

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Abstract

Alignment seeking is the process of reaching agreement on what needs to be done and on the process that should be followed to complete the activity. This empirical study extends the scope of the current project-as-practice literature by providing descriptions of how project managers actually achieve alignment. Photographs taken by the research participants are used to trigger discussion in semi-structured interviews that explore the praxis of alignment seeking in project work. The practices found to enable alignment seeking include: creating a vision; storytelling; seeding ideas; identifying and using personal drivers, and appealing to stakeholders and team members' sense of a 'higher good'. This paper highlights how alignment seeking can be achieved 'in practice' by project managers.
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1. Introduction

This paper describes how project managers undertake the activity of 'alignment seeking' in practice. Alignment seeking is a term used by O'Leary and Williams (2013). The term refers to the process of reconciling different views amongst a project team and with stakeholders to enable project delivery. It is proposed as a key activity in mobilising action in project work (O'Leary and Williams, 2013).

This research study is grounded in the need for research that is drawn from practice that discloses the "lived experience" of project work (Blomquist et al., 2010; Winter et al., 2006). Its contribution is in the disclosure of the *actual* practices of individual practitioners (praxis – refer Section 2.2) undertaking the activity of 'alignment seeking' in their project managing. We have specifically chosen to use the term 'project managing' rather than 'project management' throughout this paper. This decision is based on the discussion, grounded in Heideggerian concepts, by van der Hoorn and Whitty (2015b) that defines

'project managing' as a far broader set of practices used in managing project work than those defined in the extant body of knowledge relating to project management. In alignment with the pragmatism of practice grounded research, pragmatically, the practices that are disclosed are the tools or equipment of the project manager. Just as a carpenter uses a hammer to join pieces of wood through hammering (Heidegger, 1967), a project manager can use a coffee shop to hold a persuasive conversation to bring about alignment amongst stakeholders.

There are ongoing calls for project management research that draws from the actual experience of practitioners (Blomquist et al., 2010; Hällgren and Soderholm, 2011; Winter et al., 2006). This is driven by a need for a plurality in perspectives on project work, particularly the need for insights that reflect the "lived experience" (Cicmil et al., 2006; Soderlund, 2013). There is also a call to avoid 'simplifying' our theorising on project work, and a need to build our understanding of the inherent complexity of organisational life (Tsoukas, 2017). These calls are driven by a desire to minimise the theory-practice divide and provide research that really matters (Blomquist et al., 2010; Tsoukas, 2017). This study seeks to contribute to the literature and practice by making a contribution to our understanding of the praxis of project managers.

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In this study, a quasi-ethnographic approach, supported through the use of semi-structured interviews is used to explore the research question. Specifically, the six research participants were asked to take photographs of their experience of project managing and these were used as stimuli for face-to-face semi-structured interviews. The interviews were then transcribed and thematically analysed to disclose the praxis of alignment seeking by the research participants.

In addition to disclosing how project managers undertake alignment seeking, the study confirmed the centrality of alignment seeking in project managing. The practices (common praxis amongst the project managers) disclosed by the study included developing an understanding of stakeholders' personal drivers and interests and sharing in coffee and humour to cultivate good inter-personal relationships. 'Seeding' (or selling) ideas is also found to be a critical driver in bringing about alignment. The participants achieved this through varying praxis (individual behaviours or approaches) such as allowing stakeholders to 'discover' solutions or directions, remembering birthdays, and gradually 'unfolding' the desired project trajectory.

The structure of the article is as follows. Firstly, a summary of the extant project-as-practice literature into which this study contributes is provided. This includes the explication of the research question. This is followed by a description of the study's research methodology. The study's findings are then outlined and a discussion of the implications for theory and practice are given. Finally, a conclusion, including limitations of the study and future research directions are provided.

2. Literature review

As introduced in Section 1, there is growing interest on what is actually occurring in practice in projects (Blomquist et al., 2010; Cicmil, 2006) with the hope of decreasing the theory-practice divide. The practice-turn is focused on brining attention to situated human action (Reckwitz, 2002). This literature review provides a summary of the relevant literature relating to the 'practice-turn', including defining the terms associated with 'practice', the adoption of the 'practice-turn' in project management and more specifically the literature on the human skills element of project managing as they relate to the 'practice turn'.

2.1. The 'practice-turn' in the social sciences and organisational studies

The 'practice-turn' phenomenon emerged in the social sciences in the 1970s (Johnson et al., 2007). The movement emerged as a response to the dissatisfaction with the positivist, abstract and prescriptive research approaches of the physical sciences and a drive to shift the focus of inquiry back to human beings (Jarzabkowski et al., 2007; Johnson et al., 2007). The philosophical foundations of the practice-turn can be seen in the work of Heidegger and Wittgenstein (Reckwitz, 2002; Schatzki, 2012). Other, more contemporary scholars associated with this approach are Bourdieu, de Certeau, Foucault and Giddens (Reckwitz, 2002; Whittington, 2006).

Importantly, the practice-turn counters a subject-object split (Schatzki, 2007, 2012) which is a common theme in more traditional positivist and analytical approaches (van der Hoorn, 2016). The practice-turn approach focuses on people 'doing' activities, and the equipment involved in them, being in a reciprocal and binding relationship (Schatzki, 2012). Simplistically, the practice-turn is focused on examining *who* is involved in a particular activity, *how* they undertake that activity, and *what* they use in that activity (Jarzabkowski and Spee, 2009). Throughout, there is a focus on what people *actually* do. As such, the practice-turn focuses on what happens in an environment on a moment-to-moment basis (Whittington, 2006).

The practice-turn is associated with a pragmatic research approach (Johnson et al., 2007). It is focused on discovering knowledge that has practical utility and application rather than deriving theoretical (abstract) findings (Johnson et al., 2007). As described by Johnson et al. (2007, p. 33):

"In judging utility, primacy is granted to the practicing agent's point of view. Including practitioners in the research process itself is, then, not just a matter of ensuring relevance but a useful step to securing its very quality. There is no necessary trade-off between relevance and rigour."

The research methods most commonly associated with the practice-turn are ethnography writ large (Schatzki, 2012). This includes focus groups and engaging directly with subjects (human beings) and video recording (Schatzki, 2012). As described by Schatzki (2012) there is a focus on getting close to the people involved, recording intimate accounts in order to explore the mundane and 'taken-for-granted' routines of everyday life (Jarzabkowski and Seidl, 2008).

An area of organisational and management studies that has seen the strong usage of the 'practice-turn' lens is strategy. Use of the practice-turn approach in strategy research emerged in the 1990s (Whittington, 2006). Jarzabkowski et al. (2007) argue that a 'strategy-as-practice' approach brings a focus to human agency and how strategy is enacted (done) in an organisation. Jarzabkowski and Spee (2009, sec. Introduction) build on this in stating that the 'strategy-as-practice' approach brings "human actors and their interactions to the centre stage of strategy research." There is a growing body of literature in the strategy-as-practice domain and in management more broadly (refer Whittington (2011) for examples of studies). Whittington (2006, p. 618) highlights that the adoption of the strategy-as-practice approach is successful in elucidating strategy *actuality* which can have unexpected but important implications. Furthermore, Jarzabkowski and Spee (2009) have acknowledged that such research brings a rich understanding to specific situations rather than the development of generalisations.

2.2. Defining 'practice'

According to prominent practice-turn practitioner Schatzki, practices are: "organized nexuses of activity" (Schatzki, 2012, p. 56); they are a "set of actions". Examples of farming practices include actions such as harvesting grain, judging