



Reflections

Peter W.G. Morris

School of Construction and Project Management, UCL, London WC1E 7HB, UK

Abstract

This paper reflects on the other papers published in this Festschrift for Peter Morris. It does so from Peter's personal perspectives on the discipline of managing projects. It begins by discussing the role of scholarship in shaping the discipline. It emphasizes the importance of the front-end and relates this to the semantic difficulties associated with the term 'project'. The centrality of people and culture in general is noted. Types of knowledge and learning are discussed especially with regard to professionalism. Governance and the value of the owner's role are noted. The developing impact of ICT, Operations and Agile are discussed. The benefits of a historical perspective on the discipline are proposed and prospects for the future are outlined, particularly with regard to climate change.

© 2015 Elsevier Ltd. APM and IPMA. All rights reserved.

It is an unquestionable honor to have a Special Issue of a leading academic journal dedicated to one's work. It is a sobering experience: an occasion when one is forced to evaluate how one has performed, and an occasion to acknowledge the work and contributions of many others who have shared the journey now being reflected upon. One might quail. Conscious of one's limitations it might not be unreasonable to expect you, the reader, to echo Peggy Lee and say, "Is that all there is?" Or, like Balthazar, King of Babylon, to be told, "Thou art weighed in the balance and found wanting" (Daniel: 5: 25). Still, in the end, we can only do our best.

Personally I believe I have focused and done my best, though the impact might not have been as great and consistent as it should have been. Excuses abound but what, in the end, do I want to see said?

I have been asked to comment on the papers presented in this Special Issue. This is what this End Piece does. I have organized my comments in terms of several beliefs that underscore my approach to researching, teaching, and advising about the management of projects. I also point to trends in the discipline. First then some comments about the role of scholarship in general, which to me is extremely important, and the way we can speak about the discipline.

1. The discipline and scholarship

I believe that there *is* a discipline of managing projects. A discipline is a set of processes and practices, founded on a proven knowledge base, that work in a predictable way. I believe that we can describe how best to manage projects so that they are accomplished successfully, although we have to be careful in operationalizing this statement. What, for example, do we mean by success? As Samset and Volden say in this Special Issue, it is "a highly complex and aggregated measure." (I discuss it below.)

In staking this claim for a discipline, I am also saying that I believe there is some truth, or there are some truths, about it and that scholarship has a responsibility to uncover, evaluate, and communicate these truths. Truth is a slippery concept though, and it sometimes changes. Truth in the social sciences is different from truth about the natural sciences. It is not independent of our values as natural science is. Knowledge about Management, our subject, critically depends on context. Nevertheless, there are things that can be said, practices that can be followed, that work in a largely predictable way. I believe that scholarship has an important role to play in situating, and in nuancing, what we believe these truths to be. And scholarship is not confined to academia: the values hold generally, though speediness might be as, or more, critical.

A vital part of this scholarship is methodology. It is of fundamental importance in determining the reliability of the knowledge we might claim to have uncovered, as Bresnen in

E-mail address: pwmorris@ucl.ac.uk.

this Special Issue shows shows in his discussion of the Modes 1 and 2 means of generating knowledge (Nowotny et al., 2001, 2003; Gibbons, 1994) (academic originating and objective versus practitioner originated and reflexive: see Bresnen's Table 1). (Project management is Mode 2.) Using an appropriate methodology is both obvious and yet is often poorly done.

We should be careful in our use of so-called facts and rigorous in our evaluation and in formulating our recommendations (Morris, 2013: Chapter 18). While I believe our proffered knowledge should be empirically grounded, we should be critical of what we see. There is no point in offering evidence of supposed good practice when it is not. Facts need theory. They are seen through theory and they contribute to theory. We should judge critically whether the theoretical paradigm being used to interpret the proposed findings is appropriate. Applying the wrong theory will lead to suspect or mistaken conclusions. Thus, for example, the finding from some research a few years ago that senior executives don't see project management as having a strategic role in their businesses could be explained in that the model of project management used, PM BOK, is highly execution oriented and not strategic enough (Thomas et al., 2002). Other models of the discipline might allow for a more welcoming conclusion.

I believe, too, that we should always bear in mind the 'so what' question when reporting our research. We should try hard to distil the practical benefits of what we write and what we say, and we should be able to communicate in straightforward language. We should avoid building theoretical castles in the air which may sound learned but which really don't help practitioners to perform better.

Not only is Project Management contextual, as a discipline it is 'situated.' It was 'invented not found.' Pinto and Winch, in their Introduction to this Special Issue, refer to the normative, predictive nature of the early attempts to describe the knowledge needed to manage projects, implying perhaps that I am a critic of this and thus of Cleland & King's 1968 classic book *Systems Analysis and Project Management* as well as of the *PMBOK Guide*® (2013) which followed 20 or more years later. It is true that I am a critic of the *Guide* in that, as George Hough and I showed in the *Anatomy of Major Projects* (1987), it doesn't cover the range of knowledge areas that might be needed to manage projects successfully. But the authors could not really be blamed. They produced a description which reflected the times. The paradigm began to change only with the development of the much larger 'management of projects' framework (Morris, 1994) and with the advent of the so-called Scandinavian School in the 1990s (Morris, 2013: 67–70) with its interest in looking at what people really do and struggle with in managing projects, and asking why things had gone wrong, or right.

2. The life-cycle

It is all very well going on about truths and knowledge but what is the discipline? Does it have a distinct functional—theoretical or skill-based—core? I believe it does. Traditionally, it is about integration: the integration of all that needs doing to develop and deliver projects successfully. And what is integration? At a

minimum, coordination and control (which means that much of its work will be multi- and inter-disciplinary); and it should be skilled in advancing through the life-cycle, knowing what needs doing as the project is developed and delivered. But I believe that the job of project management should be more than just integration. It should be about creating added value. Something again that Samset and Voden endorse: "Success as a generic term means to gain...added value." Artto et al. in this Special Issue take this forward looking at different integration methods for enhancing value through linkages with operations—see below. And success? Well, there is no fixed definition but I would say 'achieving the objectives of the project sponsor' (Jugdev and Müller, 2005). And project (or program)? Surprisingly, this has proven to be a little more contentious.

For me, and indeed for Winch and Leiringer in this Special Issue, a project is a temporary endeavor. (To define and achieve specific outcomes.) A program is a collection of projects sharing a common objective and possibly common resources. But what really distinguishes projects (and programs) from non-projects is that "all projects essentially evolve through the same life-cycle sequence...something like Concept, Feasibility Design, Execution, Commission" (Morris, 2013: 13). Many temporary organizations do not have this life-cycle base. Hence, "the field can no longer—if it ever could—be considered co-extensive with the field of temporary organization" (Winch, 2014).

Without this life-cycle base—strictly, the product development life-cycle—it is hard, and makes little sense, to speak of 'the project front-end,' which, it is generally now accepted, is probably the single most important area of management focus in the management of projects. (The *PMBOK Guide*® is based on a cycle but it's Deming's 'Plan-Do-Check-Act' Cycle, not a product development life-cycle. Again, this means that the vitally important characteristics of the different stages of the project's development fail to get articulated.) Pinto and Winch underscore this. As they put it in the Introduction, "A large and fruitful arena has been the opening in research on the front-end, definitional stage of projects; Morris' position here has been widely accepted and nowhere seriously challenged. There is now a significant body around what has become known as the 'shaping' of project front ends, most of which draws explicitly on Morris' seminal work."

But this said, why, why, do Samset and Volden insist on calling the project just that portion of the life-cycle that is the implementation stage, post-sanction approval, calling the pre-sanction stage various things: pre-project, front-end phase, project governance? It's a major paradigm clash. I suspect they like to think of a project as an undertaking to achieve defined target and therefore believe that activity related to deciding what those targets should be must, by definition, be pre-project. I, on the other hand, believe that developing, optimizing, and agreeing those targets prior to beginning work to achieve them leads to better outcomes and is part of what constitutes a project. Also, philosophically, I subscribe to the view that the project as an entity exists even when only an idea—a Parmenidian view: just discussing it makes it, in a sense, real.

I believe—in fact I know, looking at the statistics—that projects and their management are very important to society.

Download English Version:

<https://daneshyari.com/en/article/6748148>

Download Persian Version:

<https://daneshyari.com/article/6748148>

[Daneshyari.com](https://daneshyari.com)