

The End of the Myth of Best Practice Approach in Project Management

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Abstract

It is broadly accepted both by academics and practitioners that projects are such temporary endeavours that create some unique ‘products’. It implies that projects are also unique by nature. It is also accepted – first of all by practitioners – that the phenomenon of ‘best practice’ to cope with projects exists. It implies that projects are same or at least there are only a few groups of very same projects that involve the same process and require the same project management devices.

Now we have to face two contradicting notions, while there is a need to resolve this contradiction.

Those who believe in the phenomenon of the best practice should accept that project management is an avowal of faith. This approach to the profession of project management implies at the same time that a certain project management device (technique, tool, method etc.) is better than other. Since projects are different in reality, one could say: what is best in case of a given project that could be the worst in an other case.

In order to find the so-called best set of project management devices (techniques, tools, methods etc.) in case of a certain project context, there is a need for theoretical basis of managing projects that involves a set of axioms and premises.

In this paper both the above mentioned theoretical bases and the use of them to find the best set of project management devices in a given case will be highlighted.

Keywords: strategy-oriented approach to projects, success criteria, theoretical bases of applying project management devices

1. Occupation or Profession – The Phenomenon of Best Practice

During the last few decades the lack of theoretical bases of managing projects – regarding the application of the project management devices – led to the phenomenon that is referred to as best practice. The best practice approach presumes that a certain project management device (technique, tool or method) is better than other. In other words: devices that have led to project success in case of a certain project, should lead to success in case of an other project as well. This

approach also implies that all of the projects are basically same. The huge numbers of project failures [3, 6, 7, 15, 20] justifies that the best practice approach is a misleading paradigm. In reality, projects are different both in terms of their end products (the project result) and their implementation process, while they are initiated and implemented within different organisational context. In this way, a certain project management device that is considered to be the best one in a given case, it could be the worse in an other case. Both the huge number of project failures and the number of those project management devices that can be used for the same purpose necessitate a new paradigm as to managing projects.

Turner [18] puts a very provocative question in this respect: whether project management is a profession. With reference to the Oxford English Dictionary and Webster American Dictionary he gives two different definitions regarding what a profession is in general:

- a vocation that requires higher learning
- an avowal or belief of faith

Turner also stated at the same time that these two definitions are not radically different but they are just different sides of the same coin. Although Turner's question and the associated answers could be put in a different way: whether project management is an occupation (like the member of board) or a profession (like medical doctor, engineer etc.). In this way, I think, the above mentioned two definitions are rather different than similar. Considering the second definitions, it could be stated that it is in line with the phenomenon of best practice since this latter relies on belief. Believers of this phenomenon follow a certain project management practice which is considered to be the best one, while the required associated project management familiarity is referred to as competence-based skill justified by practical experiences. Setting out from the phenomenon of best practice, project management is considered to be rather an occupation than a profession.

The first definition of the word 'profession' postulates higher learning. In this way a profession – even the profession of project management – should be based on firm and clear theoretical bases, i.e. the profession of project management also should involve a set of knowledge-based skill. Thus, the profession of project management should encompass familiarity with the project management devices and the ability to apply (not only use) this knowledge in order to achieve success in accordance with the role of projects in the organisations. The professionalisation of the occupation of project management in this way requires the above mentioned theoretical bases.

2. Beyond the Best Practice – The Theoretical Bases of Managing Projects

Turner [18] in his earlier mentioned paper raised the question as to whether project management is based on knowledge or faith but he did not give a definite answer. However, he stated that project management as a subject lacked a strong theoretical basis, and the project management bodies of knowledge are based more on conjecture. That is: different bodies of knowledge contribute to fostering project management as an occupation. Thus, in order to move toward the knowledge-based professional status, there is need for establishing theoretical bases. The theoretical bases of any profession presume axioms and premises. According to the Oxford English Dictionary, axiom is a proposition regarded as self-evidently true, while Webster American Dictionary says that an axiom is a maxim widely accepted on its intrinsic merit. As to the premise, Oxford English Dictionary says that it is a previous statement from which another is inferred, while according to Webster American Dictionary a premise is either of the first two propositions of a syllogism from which the conclusion is drawn. Either in case of axiom or premise, both dictionaries are in line with each other.

In order to develop and define those axioms and premises that are to be considered as theoretical basis of managing projects, first the role of projects in the organisations, than the associated success criteria should be understood properly. Cleland [4] states in his book that projects are building blocks in the strategy implementation, i.e. projects are the means of change. The strategy-oriented approach to both projects and project management [9, 10] implies that the role of projects in any organisation is to realise the change that is set by the organisational strategic objectives. Consequently, the long-term success of an organisation relies on successful change, i.e. successful projects.

Many authors [1, 2, 5, 9, 11, 19] argue against the traditional approach to judging the phenomenon of project success. The traditional approach focuses on the iron triangle i.e. quality of the project outcome, the duration time and cost of implementing the project. These authors, at the same time, suggest other different criteria, though all of them point out the outstanding role of stakeholders' satisfaction from the point of view of project success. The author of this paper [11] suggests – in accordance with the previously mentioned strategy-oriented approach to projects – a set of criterion for judging success on projects. In this way the achieved success on projects should be evaluated:

- against the predefined project triangle, i.e. quality of the completed project result, duration time and implementation cost,
- against the client satisfaction, i.e. how the completed project (the project result) contributes to achieving the underlying strategic objective,
- against stakeholder satisfaction, i.e. how the stakeholders of the project accept the project itself.

The project client is also considered to be one of the stakeholders, though it looks wise to take into account this player separately. The main reason for this is the active role of the client organisation regarding initiating the project in order to realise a certain strategic objective, while other stakeholders have passive role as to project initiation. It is also should be noted that the above success criteria postulate each other to a certain extent. Taking into consideration the role of projects (and project management) and the associated success criteria the following statements could be made:

- Projects must be successful because of the long-term success of the organisation.
- Projects are different because of their different underlying need for change (strategic objectives).
- Projects are implemented in different organisational context because of both external (e.g. industry environment) and internal (e.g. human resources, organisational culture etc.) diversity.

In the light of the role of projects and associated success criteria these simple statements look such propositions that are regarded as self-evidently true. Thus, from the point of view of managing projects these statements are considered to be axioms. These axioms directly do not help project management professionals to identify the best-suited project management devices, although they provide a good basis for developing those premises by means of that this task could be achieved. In order to formulate these premises, unlike the starting points presumed by the best practice approach, the following axioms are taken into account:

- Those project management devices (techniques, tools, methods) that can be used for the same purpose, e.g. different scheduling techniques, different project organisational arrangements, different types of contract, different types of payment,

and so forth, are equal regarding their usefulness. That is, none of them is better than another.

- Not the project management devices usable for the same purpose are different in terms of usefulness (while they are different in terms of suitability) but the projects and the organisational context of the project companies (clients and external contributors) regarding the project implementation are different.
- Project management devices (techniques, tools, methods) used in a given particular case should be suitable to the project characteristics and to the organisational characteristics of the project company in order to achieve success.

A study completed by the Tavistock Institute [16] revealed two types of inherent characteristics of the projects that appear in different way [10, 11], such as:

- Uncertainty that manifest itself in terms of:
 - novelty and the extent of novelty of the operating process of the expected project result,
 - definition of the project scope and the extent of definition regarding the details,
 - novelty and the extent of novelty of the workflow that brings about the project result,
 - reliability and completeness of the information regarding the site of the project implementation,
 - stability and the extent of stability regarding the legal environment of the project implementation,
 - inflation and its extent (or its acceleration) in the course of implementing the project.
- Interdependence that manifests itself in terms of [14, 17]:
 - workflow interdependence that can be:
 - pooled
 - sequential (simple or overlap)
 - reciprocal
 - process interdependence characteristic to the operating process of the expected project result,
 - scale interdependence that indicates both complexity and diversity of functional and non-functional capabilities of the expected project result.

At the same time, the organisational context of the project company [11] could be interpreted in terms of:

- Project management professionalism available in the project company (knowledge, skill, approach).
- Expectations regarding the project triangle (better parameters, earlier completion, lower cost).
- Organisational culture (shared values, attitudes etc.).
- Other project related organisational characteristics, such as:
 - stakeholder behaviour,
 - functional workload of the human resources,
 - professional competence of the functional units (human resources),
 - priority of the project in the project company,
 - organisational structure of the project company etc.

As to the project management devices that can be used for the same purpose it was emphasised earlier that none of them is better than another. While it is true, it is also true that these devices are different in terms of suitability, i.e. each of these project management devices that could be used for the same purpose (e.g. project organisational arrangements) has both advantages and disadvantages.

The relationships exist amongst the previously mentioned project characteristics (uncertainty and interdependence) and the different manifestation of the organisational context of the project company, and, at the same time, the different characteristics (advantages and disadvantages) of the project management devices usable for the same purpose can be used for developing premises. By means of these premises, as the first two propositions of a syllogism, the conclusion could be drawn regarding the best-suited project management devices in a given particular case. In this way the required premises are available in order to apply the project management devices (techniques, tools, methods) in a professional manner instead of relying on the myth of the best practice.

Although the premises can be utilised in case of each group of the project management devices [11], the next section of this paper (because of the limitation in terms of pages) gives only one illustration of their use.

3. Applying the Premises in Practice – Finding the Best-Suited Project Management Devices

From the point of view of the theoretically based approach to managing projects there is a need for distinguishing the term USE from the term APPLY. The term ‘use’, in this respect, is considered to be a technical concept that implies the proper employment of a certain project management technique, tool or method. While the term ‘apply’ is considered to be a managerial concept that implies the employment of the proper, i.e. the best-suited, project management techniques, tools and methods within a certain organisational context in case of a given project.

The premises identified earlier help project managers in the course of applying the project management devices in a proper manner. That is, the premises provide the theoretical basis by means of that the best-suited project management techniques, tools or methods could be identified that are fit for a given particular project and its organisational context.

A recently published book of the author [11] provides an extensive explanation and illustration as to the proper use of the premises in case of each group of the project management techniques, tools and methods. Because of the limitations regarding the extent of this paper, now we concentrate, as an example, on the question of identifying the best-suited project organisational arrangement.

The overwhelming current approach to making decision on the project organisational form is fostered by many of the so-called project maturity models [8, 12, 13]. Most of these models qualify the project organisational arrangements based on the formal (de jure) line authority delegated to the project managers by their superiors. In this way, the project task force is considered to be the best project organisational arrangement in any case since project managers have formal line authority over the project team members in such a case. At the same time, it is broadly accepted in the management science that the main role of the organisational arrangements is to provide co-ordination regarding the workflow and its contributors. Thus, the best-suited project organisational arrangement is that one which can provide proper coordination for the project implementation process while it requires the least interference with the parent organisational structure.

By means of the so-called project profile (Figure 1) both uncertainty and interdependence characteristic to the project can be visualised. While a so-called organisational profile (Figure 2) can visualise the relevant characteristics of the organisational context.

| | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 |
|------------|---|---|---|---|--------|
| | | IMPORTANCE OF THE PROJECT | | | |
| | | COMPETENCE OF THE FUNCTIONAL UNITS | | | |
| | | ORGANISATIONAL CULTURE | | | |
| | | WORKLOAD IN THE FUNCTIONAL UNITS | | | |
| FUNCTIONAL | | ORGANISATIONAL ARRANGEMENT OF THE COMPANY | | | MATRIX |
| | | ATTITUDE OF THE INTERNAL STAKEHOLDERS | | | |
| | | ATTITUDE OF THE EXTERNAL STAKEHOLDERS | | | |

Figure 1
Project profile

| | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 |
|--|---|--|---|---|---|
| | | OPERATING PROCESS OF THE EXPECTED PROJECT RESULT | | | |
| | | ACCURACY OF THE PROJECT RESULT TO BE IMPLEMENTED | | | |
| | | THE WORKFLOW CREATING THE PROJECT RESULT | | | |
| | | SOCIAL AND ECONOMIC STATE (legal system, custom procedures and so on) | | | |
| | | INFLATION DURING THE IMPLEMENTATION PHASE | | | |
| | | PROCESS INTERDEPENDENCE OF THE EXPECTED PROJECT RESULT | | | |
| | | SCALE INTERDEPENDENCE OF THE EXPECTED PROJECT RESULT (size and complexity) | | | |
| | | WORKFLOW INTERDEPENDENCE | | | |

Figure 2
Organisational profile

In case of both profiles a five-point scale could help to evaluate the extent to which a certain feature (interdependence, uncertainty, organisational particularity) is characteristic to the project. The shaded quadrangles are considered to be characteristic values that are used as the second proposition of the syllogism in case of a given project. The first proposition is the underlying relationship between a certain characteristic value and the required measure of co-ordination.

For example:

- When the project implementation process is standardised (e.g. in terms of reliable plans) because of the low characteristic values of both uncertainty and interdependence, there is no potential for many unforeseen decisions that should be made in the course of implementing the project. Thus, there is no need for such a project manager who has formal (de jure) line authority over the team members since the standardisation could provide the necessary co-ordination. That is: a linearfunctional based project organisational arrangement could be used properly.
- When the features of the relevant organisational context are not favourable for using either linear-functional based or matrix based project organisation (because of the hostile organisational culture, lack of professional competence of the functional units, and so on), a project task force is more suitable even if the project implementation process could be standardised to a considerable extent.

A decision-maker should take into account all the possible similar relationships in order to use them as first propositions of the syllogism. At the same time she/he should be able to compromise the consequences of the different characteristic values both in case of the project profile and the organisational profile.

4. Recommendations and Suggestions - Achieving Professionalisation

While the best practice approach requires imitating or copying successful solutions, the theoretically based approach to managing projects postulates knowledge based skills regarding applying the project management devices (techniques, tools, methods). Thus, there is a need to move project management from the status of being an occupation to the status of being a profession. Zwerman et al [21] recently analysed this journey based on studying mainly the way of nursing and social work toward professionalisation. Zwerman and his co-authors identified those activities that should be undertaken in order to achieve and maintain the professional status of project management. These are:

- Monopoly over the use of the occupation name: nowadays nearly anyone can use it.
- Defining the knowledge area of the subject: beside the (practical) competence based familiarity there is a need for theoretically based skills, i.e. knowledge and the ability to apply the knowledge.
- Definition of the field of operation: defining those areas of projects where skilled project management professionals are required.
- Control of education, accreditation and certification, and the associated licensing: gaining a home at universities.
- Changes regarding the professional associations: representing the interest of the profession.

All of us should agree with the above listed points since all of the implications of these points have to be completed in order to move project management from the occupational status to a professional status. Nevertheless, the attention will be drawn to the following recommendations and suggestions:

- The briefly introduced theoretical bases and the use of the premises – extensively explained in a recently published book [11] – could provide a robust base for an esoteric body of knowledge. Both IPMA and PMI body of knowledge are based on the concept USE instead of the concept APPLY. The first one requires knowledge regarding the theoretical basis of a single project management device but does not require theoretical basis to apply the bulk of techniques, tools and methods in proper manner in order to find the best-suited solutions. In this way nowadays project management as a subject is a collection of add-on devices that are not acceptable by the academic world.

The body of knowledge should be reengineered utilising the theoretical bases regarding the application of the known project management devices (techniques, tools and methods). Otherwise project management will remain an avowal of faith, i.e. an occupation.

- If the theoretically based subject project management is accepted and – moreover – propagated by the professional associations, there will be a hope for being accepted by the academic world. In this way there will be a hope for being acknowledged as a profession by the state authorities.

Professional associations should accept and propagate the concept of the theoretically based practice of project management. Otherwise there is no potential for being accepted either by the academic world or by the governments.

- Certification of project managers is controlled by professional associations while most of the national certification processes are based on IPMA or PMI standards. These standards do not require theoretically based skills (knowledge and the ability to use that knowledge), instead, they require practically based familiarity with the project management devices.

Universities – akin to the case of the mature professions (e.g. engineer, teacher etc.) – should give a home for project management, not only as a one-semester elective course but they should introduce postgraduate diploma courses in project management based on project management departments at business and engineering faculties. At the same time, universities – also akin to the case of mature professions – should take over certification from the professional associations as well. Otherwise there is no potential for achieving a professional status, and for being acknowledged by the state authorities.

5. Summary and Conclusions

As far as I know, this is the first attempt to develop theoretical bases for managing projects. Hopefully the introduced theoretical bases, both axioms and premises, provide a robust and reliable base for the knowledge based project management instead of the belief based best practice approach. Axioms were defined based on the role of projects in the organisations, and the associated set of success criteria. Premises were developed in compliance with the requirements of syllogism. The premises themselves are derived from the relationships exist between the characteristics of both projects and their organisational context, and the different features of the project management devices from the point of view of their suitability. Based on these premises as propositions, conclusions can be drawn regarding the best-suited project management devices in order to achieve project success, and ultimately organisational success by means of successful projects. A couple of practical applications and case analyses have justified the usefulness and applicability of the introduced theoretically based management approach to projects.

The ultimate conclusions are as follows:

- Project management associations should change their attitudes, and they should concentrate on representing the interest of the profession to achieve professionalisation. At the same time they should gradually hand over to universities the certification of professionals.
- Universities should give a home – at least a department devoted to the subject – for project management, and they should undertake postgraduate diploma courses that are considered to be internationally acknowledged certification. The author of this paper do hope that by means of developing and defining the theoretical bases for managing projects not only some probably interesting approach has been created but it is a real contribution to the professionalisation of the occupation of project management as well.

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