

Behaviours that achieve

- vital engagement for project organisations

Martin Price

A project manager is expected to lead their project. Rarely can they do the work alone. A project's outcome is achieved by activities and decisions made throughout the project organisation including all stakeholders. It is in the project organisation that the work is done; adapting to circumstances as these emerge. Such ventures carry 'uncertainty that matters'¹ ie risk. In many projects, the project organisation itself is a significant source of risk.

High venture project organisations need to be innovative and agile as well as reliable. Collaboration, persistence and courage need to be cultivated with care. Capability comes from able people, empowered and closely engaged.

When the course of a project is challenged, behaviour (involving the sensing, thinking, dialogue and decisions of players) is the principal means by which a project organisation can adapt: reducing down-side risks and exploiting up-side risks (opportunity).

I recall a recent project meeting where the group allowed conflicting views and interests to bring negotiations to a halt. There was frustration and resentment in abundance. Fortunately, someone was able to introduce a new way to look at the issue. He helped to

ful contribution, where someone expresses appreciation - shares a different way of thinking - exposes their own vulnerability - asks a key question - is willing to risk rejection by stepping away from the main-stream; is a crucial factor for enabling project organisations to find their best way forward.

When beneficial behaviour is in short supply

Of course the opposite of these behaviours will easily bring damage and delay. The unwillingness to listen - the absence of personal recognition - the over-sight - the naivety to what is actually going on politically - pride not put aside - the hiding of the facts - the absence of empathy - the failure to inform and people retreating to 'knowing their place', are behaviours too commonly seen in project organisations.

On 28th January 1986 Challenger exploded shortly after lift-off. Remember the 'O' rings? The official enquiry attributed the disaster to human failure. It reported the root cause to be the engineering group's feelings of invulnerability, the pressure from Congress and the 'group think' pattern of social conformity by which they failed to properly examine and act upon the risks attached to their decision making.

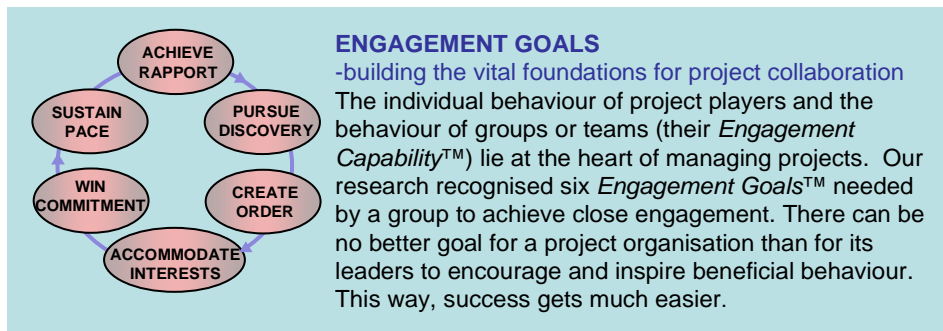
Human and organisational competence 'HOCs'

Project players are continually presented with opportunities to build pace, productivity, innovation and agility - to 'own the ball' and to soar. But, in many cases and for many reasons, too few opportunities are firmly grasped. Instead, projects are often slow-moving, synergy sleeps and people give well-short of their best and fail to inspire the rest. 'Lose-lose' can easily prevail, with leadership lacking and vision obscured. All this is a heavy price to pay; limiting the vitality and collaboration on which projects greatly depend. The days become long, satisfaction short and opportunities lost.

A project acquires extra value only from human and social endeavour. People's imagination, both individually and when working in groups, their will, communication, clear-headedness and social interaction are the engines to make it all happen - as delivered by a team and the whole organisation. Projects depend on these engines and they can usefully be seen as the 'venture capital' of a project enterprise.

Traditional and Extreme projects - emergence of a 'New Wave'

Projects vary hugely in the range and extent of the challenges that are presented.

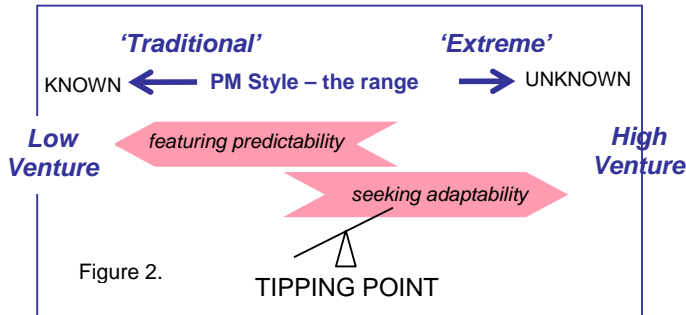


save face all-round. That contribution was crucial to the survival and eventually to the success of an important meeting. His questions and observations did the trick; bringing very welcome humour and candour to the meeting.

Single-handedly, he brought rapid recovery and a positive mood and purpose to the group. As I heard him speak, I sensed courageous intent, a clear insight into the dynamics at work, well developed social skills and the respect that he showed for those around him. In my experience, this kind of responsible and insight-

¹ David Hillson and Ruth Murray Webster
'Understanding and managing risk attitude' Gower

The style of management varies accordingly. (See Figure 2) At one end, (labelled 'Low Venture') a project can be tackled as a straight-forward exercise providing a practical response to well-known and understood requirements and prevailing circumstances. The project's purpose and the stakeholder's expectations are both clear and can be safely expected to sustain. In such projects, (those that we might term as 'Traditional'), plans are a reliable prediction of what is to happen. We can expect process prescriptions and methods to define what is to be done and when, to achieve a successful execution.



At the other end of the range, projects are quite different and are usually far more demanding. Here, what is to be achieved and how, are to an extent unknown (and sometimes unknowable until the project is under way). The challenges of ambiguity, adaptation, system complexity, innovation, controversy, risk and often a shifting external environment, tend to predominate and structured methods alone are self-evidently not enough. All sectors of our economy now show increasing dependence on High Venture projects and programmes.

As shown in Figure 2, moving along this range away from the 'Traditional', we find that as adaptability becomes more important, predictability wanes and dependence on prescription is less useful and falls away². The level of venture³ steadily grows and at some point along the continuum a paradigm shift occurs.

At this tipping point, a project starts to be driven more by emergent events and from fresh insights than by plans and formulae set in the past. This is High Venture territory. The variety of perspectives required and the need to secure connection with stakeholders as project players, means that challenges become principally, human and organisational.

The capability of groups

All the players in a project organisation deployed to a High Venture project need to be equipped to play their part. The capability of groups has to be 'systemic,' relying more on the players' competence and

capability than on process prescriptions. Well-developed human and organisational behaviour needs to be the norm and players should be expected to self-manage. In a High Venture business environment, the capability to lead and adapt has to be nurtured and grown by competent professionals, closely and purposefully engaged – together and with other stakeholders. The key players need to develop human and organisational competence and in my experience, these should include

- Managing self and relationships
- Leading, communicating & social interaction
- *Engagement Capability*TM
- Reasoning with rigour
- Navigating your way through organisations
- Managing discovery and change
- Sustaining pace.

A project organisation propelled by its Venture Capital

Undertaking a project involves players in an endeavour that draws heavily on their social, political, leadership as well as systematic abilities.

Their quality of thinking and dialogue, sense of discovery and their capacity for organisational agility carries more leverage than can any prescription of process or method. What is to be done and how, and the way that the organisation needs to adapt to a project requirement, has to be orchestrated by the key players themselves. The challenge for businesses today is how human and organisational abilities can be improved when uncertainties persist.

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² 'Extreme Project Management' Doug DeCarlo. Jossey-Bass

³ 'An undertaking involving uncertainty as to the outcome' Dictionary.com Unabridged (v 1.1)