

# It's people who get things done!

## Five helpful ways of thinking about the human dimension of project management

In the third of his current series of articles, Terry Cooke-Davies reflects on one of the most important and yet most misunderstood aspects of project management - the human dimension.

There can be few people who would disagree that the human dimension of project management is crucial to successful projects. After all, projects are delivered by groups of people working together, not by techniques, tools, methods or processes. Teams of people working well together on projects accomplish amazing results, while others seem to struggle to accomplish even the simplest tasks.

Yet the literature on project management is dominated by discussions of techniques, tools, methods and processes, rather than the human dimension. A detailed analysis of the contents of six project management 'bodies of knowledge'<sup>1</sup>, correlated with a review of journal articles published in both USA and Europe between 1988 and 1998<sup>2</sup> has confirmed what we all intuitively knew to be the case: that three times as many 'technical' topics as 'people' ones are considered central to what project managers need to know about<sup>3</sup>. Does this mean that the focus of attention of project management practitioners, researchers and professional bodies is more on the technical side of project management than it is on the human side?

Not necessarily. Hidden away among the literature are at least three hints that more than lip service is paid to the importance of the 'human dimension'.

Firstly, although the research on critical success factors on projects is largely derived from Baker Murphy & Fisher's classic analysis of those factors leading to success or failure on 650 aerospace, construction and other

projects<sup>4</sup>, a review by Thomas Lechler<sup>5</sup> of 448 German projects in 1998 led him to conclude that 'when it comes to project management, it's the people that matter'. Using a structural relationship analysis, he found that 'people' factors accounted for 47% of the variance in project success, whereas other factors that he called 'activities' and 'barriers' accounted for no more than 12% between them.

Secondly, Lynn Crawford's research into the workplace competence of project managers<sup>6</sup> found some evidence that project managers who rated themselves more highly than others for how much they carried out communications practices, also tended to be seen as better performers by their supervisors.

And thirdly, analysis carried out by Human Systems of 136 projects<sup>7</sup> tends to support these conclusions. Half of the six project management practices that correlate strongly to improved time predictability have a strong 'people-y' flavour to them: how adequately the whole company is educated in risk management, how adequately owners are assigned to each risk, and how adequate a document is that shows

which organisational unit is responsible for which activities.

These three hints on their own, however, hardly amount to conclusive evidence of what we intuitively know to be true - that it is people that deliver projects, not techniques, and it is the human factors that are decisive in achieving project success.

So what can we do, as project management practitioners, to redress the imbalance between 'human factors' and 'technical factors' in the way the profession thinks about and talks about project management?

Perhaps a part of the problem is that we are all human beings, and so assume a certain level of competence in the human dimension. There is virtually no aspect of our lives in which we do not use our interpersonal skills and attitudes to relate to other people, in contrast to the limited and professional use that we make of techniques such as critical path analysis.

So how can we reframe the way we talk about and think about human factors on projects in a more helpful way? How can we make sure that our training and our professional conversations give the 'human dimension' the emphasis it deserves?

Well, one way is to take seriously the term 'dimension'. At a workshop held in January 2000, members of the Network suggested that it was misleading to view 'human factors' as simply a set of alternative 'knowledge areas' to the technical factors listed in bodies of knowledge. The reality is that every project management technique needs to be applied by the people who make up the project team. There is truly a 'human dimension' to scope planning, to schedule management, to activity

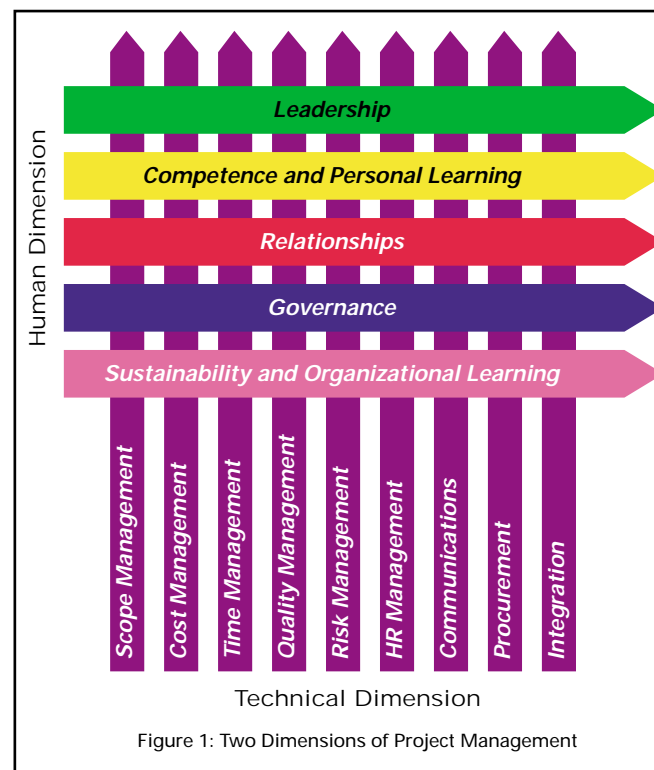


Figure 1: Two Dimensions of Project Management

definition and so on. And this dimension is distinct from the content of the technique itself.

In this article I am going to sketch out five possible lenses through which to view this 'human dimension', and to list the topics that a serious discussion of each of these 'viewpoints' might possibly need to include. The relationship of these viewpoints to the classic 'knowledge areas' (which I am calling the 'technical dimension', since it relates predominately to techniques and tools) is illustrated in Figure 1.

The five viewpoints are as follows:

- Leadership
- Competence and personal learning
- Relationships
- Governance
- Sustainability and organizational learning.

### Leadership

The first view of the human dimension that I want to consider is the perennial topic of 'Leadership'. It is a topic that has been around for as long as people have been writing about management in general and project management in particular. There are two reasons that it seems particularly appropriate to put it in the place of honour in this article, however.

Firstly, as I pointed out in an earlier article, these are difficult times for many organizations, and it is at precisely such difficult times that leadership is at a premium.

The second point is perhaps more provocative. Ever since I first read John Kotter on the difference between leadership and management<sup>8</sup>, I have been aware of the different titles used by project managers – project leader, project manager, project engineer, project director, programme manager and so on. The list seems to be limited only by human ingenuity!

In spite of this confusion of terms, however, it is possible to make a strong case for using the term 'project leader' to describe the senior executive on a project, rather than the term 'project manager'. It is understandable why we often don't do this. After all, project management, as practised in the modern organization, has its roots in engineering and in control theory. And in terms of controlling a project, it is appropriate to talk about a 'project manager' and 'project management'. Indeed, all the world's professional bodies that seek to represent project managers use the term 'management', and this magazine is entitled 'Project MANAGER Today.'

With the expansion of the project management world view into more and more areas of organizational life today, however, projects and programmes have become the way in which an organization chooses to structure the work that is designed to change its capability in some way, in order better to equip it to cope with

the challenges it expects to face.

The case can be argued that there are two different world views that are appropriate to the way we think about all organizational work – processes (operations, transactions), and projects (or programmes). Processes are about coordinating people who have specific work-related competencies and tend to be organized into functional departments, so that they work together effectively to satisfy the repetitive demands of the organization's current customers and stakeholders. Processes are essentially about what happens today in an organization.

Projects or programmes, on the other hand, are about introducing beneficial change to the organization. In this context, project management is essentially interwoven with the management of change – and change is the province of leadership rather than management.

Topics that might well be included under the 'leadership' component include:

- Visionary leadership
- The management of change
- Motivation
- Team building and team development
- Facilitation and group dynamics.

### Competence and personal learning

A second possible way of viewing the 'human dimension' is through the capability of individuals to thrive in a project or programme environment. It is closely related to leadership, since a major element in inspirational leadership appears to be self-knowledge, and the ability to control one's own emotional climate so as to maintain an upbeat and encouraging environment.<sup>9</sup>

We have already discussed project management's roots in control theory. The trouble is that as the world becomes increasingly complex, the controls that we institute themselves become a part of the problem rather than a part of the solution. We have estimated elsewhere that for every £100 million value that project managers in well-run businesses promise to deliver to their stakeholders, less than £80 million is actually delivered. And this suggests that the control approach just isn't working. Of course, we can always

do the equivalent of the stereotypical British holidaymaker seeking to make himself understood in foreign climes, and 'speak louder and more slowly', and this is what many project managers indeed fall back on: more controls, more reports, more timesheets, more bureaucracy.

Occasionally this may work (although we have little evidence to suggest that it does), but what we do know is that when people and teams take the trouble to learn from relevant prior experience, and to apply this learning both at the start of new projects, and throughout their life, the project performance is improved.

Topics that appear relevant when the human dimension is viewed through the lens of personal competence are:

- Knowledge, experience and personal qualities
- Learning and personal development
- Qualifications
- Self-knowledge, emotional intelligence and what Peter Senge calls 'Personal Mastery'
- Neurolinguistic programming
- Lessons learned, especially the 'tacit knowledge' aspect.

### Relationships

It may seem a little eccentric to discuss relationships as a way of viewing the human dimension, but I do so because I am convinced that relationships provide the defining environment for all forms of human flourishing. This is based partly on years of personal experience and observation, and partly on recent research in industrial psychology and in project manager competencies.

Firstly, in his influential book, 'Emotional

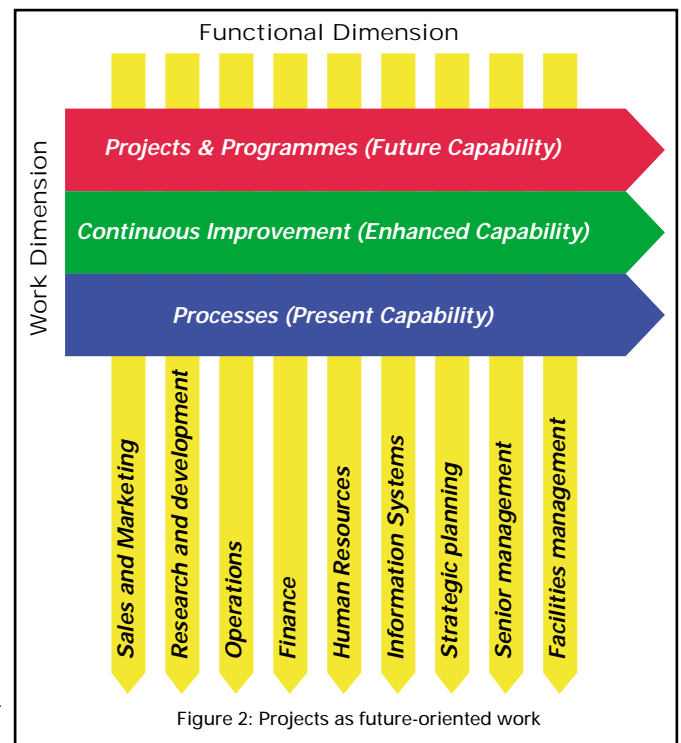


Figure 2: Projects as future-oriented work

Intelligence', Daniel Goleman cites substantial evidence that the quality of relationships has a major impact on people's health and well-being<sup>10</sup>. Good relationships have a healing power, poor or no relationships add to stress and damage health.

Secondly, two aspects of relationships were singled out by Owen Gaden as being among the small number of critical competencies that distinguish outstanding project managers from merely competent ones in defence projects: 'interpersonal assessment' (meaning the ability to know team members well enough to assign them tasks that they will be competent to perform) and 'relationship development' (meaning the ability to develop appropriate relationships with all project stakeholders).

*Topics that might be considered as a part of this viewpoint include:*

- Stakeholder management
- Team working
- Communications
- Supply chain management
- Communities of practice.

### Governance

Governance is often discussed in terms of the processes by which key decisions are made about a project, such as the decision to provide or withhold funds. I am suggesting that there is an argument for including governance as one of the five lenses through which to view the human dimension of project management.

The argument has to do with creating an environment within which people can exercise their skills and knowledge to the benefit of the project and, incidentally, to themselves as well. The topic, as I am defining it, embraces the culture within which the project leader and the team operate, and the style of interpersonal relationships within which decisions are taken. At its heart is the degree of day-to-day control that the project team is allowed to exercise, given their greater knowledge of the circumstances that relate to any given operational decision.

Indeed, Rodney Turner has argued very convincingly that one of the major differences between project and programme work on the one hand, and operational or transactional work on the other, is that in the project environment there is, of necessity, a discontinuity between governance and operational control.<sup>11</sup> This is one of difficulties facing organizations with a strong functional side of the matrix (see Figure 2), where the people who are likely to be responsible for project governance, for example as project sponsors, are likely to be more comfortable with a management style where governance and operational control go hand in hand.

*The topics that this viewpoint might contain include:*

- Authorisation and 'contracts'
- Empowerment with control
- Organizational culture
- Matrix management.

### Sustainability and organizational learning

The final viewpoint in the human dimension is slightly different in kind from the others. It relates to both the quantity and the quality of people who are working on projects and programmes.

If an organization is to undertake all the projects and programmes that are necessary to implement the chosen organizational strategy, then it follows that there must be sufficient people with the right competence, skills, attitudes and know how to deliver the whole portfolio of projects.

The lens of 'sustainability' encourages us to ask ourselves what the future manpower requirements will be, and what is being done to provide the right quantity and quality of people. This applies equally whether the project load is growing or reducing.

Topics included in this viewpoint might include:

- Apprenticeship and situated learning
- Education, training and career development
- Resource and capacity planning
- Issues about matrix strength.

### Concluding observations

In this article we have reviewed five possible ways of looking at and talking about the human dimension, so as to give it the weight that it deserves. If we are to act on these suggestions, then future 'bodies of knowledge' or project management textbooks will not have one set of topics (the larger one) on the tools and techniques of project management and another (the smaller) on 'human factors'. Instead, when discussing any aspect of project management knowledge, such as risk management, there will be two different viewpoints from which the topic will be examined - on the one hand tools and techniques, and on the other hand the human dimension.

And then, perhaps, we will deliver £110 million of value for every £100 million that we promise!

Terry is the managing director of Human Systems International Limited, a company with operations in UK, USA and Australia, that supports a global network of organisations that are committed to working together to improve their own organisations' results through projects. People representing member organizations work together in workshops, in working parties and in targeted benchmarking study teams. In their own individual ways, they demonstrate time and time again what can be accomplished when the environment allows people to flourish. Terry can be contacted at [cooke-daviest@humansystems.co.uk](mailto:cooke-daviest@humansystems.co.uk).

1 The six bodies of knowledge were APM version 2, the CRMP proposal for the APM (subsequently adopted as version 4), Rodney Turner's proposal in the International Journal of Project Management (IJPM), IPMA's International Competency Baseline, PMI's PMBOK(®) Guide (1996 version), and Human System's own Corporate Practice Questionnaire v3.

2 Themistocleous, G. and Wearne, S. H. Project management topic coverage in journals. International Journal of Project Management. 2000; 18(1): pages 7-11.

3 See Chapter 2 and Appendix P-1 in Cooke-Davies, T, 'Towards Improved Project Management Practice', (2001), dissertation.com, USA.

4 Baker, Bruce N.; Murphy, David C., and Fisher, Dalmar. Determinants of Project Success. (1974) National Aeronautics and Space Administration; NGR 22-03-028.

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6 Crawford, Lynn. Profiling the Competent Project Manager. Proceedings of PMI Research Conference; Paris. Philadelphia: Project Management Institute, Inc.; 2000

7 Cooke-Davies, T. op. cit. pp197 to 203

8 Kotter, John P. (1990) 'What Leaders Really do', HBR, reprinted in Volume 79 Number 11, December 2001.

9 Goleman, D., Boyatzis, R., and McKee, A. (2001) 'Primal Leadership: The Hidden Driver of Great Performance', HBR, Volume 79 Number 11, December 2001.

10 Goleman, D. (1996) 'Emotional Intelligence', Bloomsbury, London, England pp 178 to 179.

11 Turner, R. and Keegan, A. (1999) 'The Versatile Project-based Organization. Governance and Operational Control', European Management Journal, Vol 17, No 3.

